

A MURDER FOR A MILLION

By
Roy Vickers
Author of
Ishmael's Wife



A MURDER FOR A MILLION

WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

Gregory Blenkiron, an old man tortured with disease, desiring death above all things, yet unable to die a suicide, left a million pounds to whichever of his four relatives should have the moral courage to end his misery by killing him. As accessory to his own murder he so set the stage that natural death would be assumed. A million for a murder—that was the bribe offered to Arabella, a wizened old maid; Turley, a speculative financier; Miriam, a shabby-genteel widow with the problem of her son's start in life; and Christopher, a brilliant young scientist needing money for research. Within twelve hours the million was claimed.

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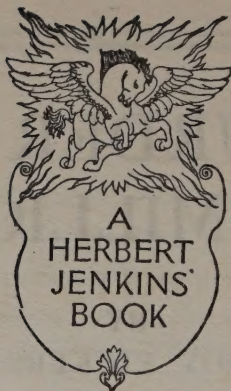
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A MURDER FOR
:: A MILLION ::

BY
ROY VICKERS

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CHAPTER I

THE FOUR HEIRS

THE gloom of winter twilight lay over Grosvenor Square. Bleak boughs quivered in a wind that was raw with cold and slow with fog. The damp of the earth rose up to meet the damp of the air; the pavements glistened with a moisture that had not the dignity of rain.

In the huge house at the western corner curtains had been drawn against the approach of evening, but evening triumphed. The dark and damp pervaded the spacious apartments, dimming the lights and mocking the fires. In the hall—a vast place of gleaming floor and oaken walls and empty armour—the very silences were cold.

At the foot of the staircase stood three figures, oddly out of keeping with their surroundings. They were strangers in the house, though they had lived in it all their lives. They gave the impression of being huddled together.

The eldest of the three, a sallow-faced woman of early middle age, a fur-lined scarf about her meagre shoulders, seemed to sense that their position was vaguely undignified.

“I think we had better go in,” she said with a shiver. “Of course——”

Arabella Cave’s voice trailed off into nothingness. Her voice always did trail off into nothingness. It was one of the many reasons why Turley, her brother, disliked her.

“There’s no hurry,” said Turley irritably. “The doctors haven’t left yet. Phew! You can smell ’em.”

A baize-covered door at the extreme left opened and a girl came out. Turley’s bright small eyes narrowed to a leer; they roamed up and down her slender length,

appraising her and, as she came nearer, his lips flickered into a smile which only one type of woman does not find insufferable. Arabella, catching his expression, peered for the cause and found it. Her gaze hardened to a disapproving stare.

The girl ignored both Turley and Arabella. She did not even give them the satisfaction of quickening her pace as she passed them. There was something superb about her detachment; in fact, there was something superb about her altogether. Her intensely black hair was piled upon her head like a coronet; her eyes—dark as jet in her creamy white face—held a regal scorn; even the challenge flung by her scarlet lips was that of a queen guarded by a hundred spears.

She reached the massive staircase and began to ascend it. Arabella, drawing aside to let her pass, put up an impertinent lorgnette. Turley's smile spread unashamedly.

The third member of the group shook himself free of the thoughts that had been chaining him to a contemplation of the fire; he looked up and, seeing the girl, bowed courteously. She glanced down at him, returning his bow with a supple grace. The next moment the turn of the staircase had taken her out of sight.

"Foreign!" sniffed Arabella, referring possibly to the bow. "Very bad style altogether, *I* consider, but there!"

"Uncommon, certainly," was Turley's verdict. "Full of beans, too, I daresay! Ghastly job being at Uncle Gregory's beck and call all day long. She's often here till nine or ten, I understand. Didn't know you'd met her, Chris."

Christopher Cordant's eyes had strayed back to the fire again. He did not raise them.

"Miss More is very kindly piloting a monograph of mine through the Press," he said. "If I had realised she had so little leisure, I should not have accepted her offer of assistance. . . . It is four o'clock." He strode towards a heavily carved door on the right and opened it.

As he stood aside to let his half-sister enter, his head tilted lazily back, his hands thrust into his pockets, Christopher Cordant looked extraordinarily handsome. Arabella eyed him with unconscious resentment. Her vanity, that could find in herself so little upon which to feed, rebelled against his lithe and balanced muscularity, his

clean-cut features and the charm of his rare smile. She would tell herself, when contemplating Christopher, that it was most unnecessary for a scientist to be endowed with the appearance of a matinee idol ; and it but added fuel to the fire to know that Christopher himself emphatically agreed with her. If his good looks had not irritated him as they did, she might have forgiven him for them. Of such mental calibre was Arabella.

The great reception-room which the three were entering had, fifty years ago, been a ballroom in which four hundred couples could dance without being crowded. Two massive chandeliers hung from the ceiling. The brocade-panelled walls had a barely-perceptible odour of mustiness. Rare cabinets of priceless china, old gilded settees—all was artificial, uninviting, redolent of a bygone age. The one note of modernity was an up-to-date writing-table in one corner, and towards this corner the party unconsciously gravitated.

"I don't suppose he'll be here for half-an-hour yet," said Turley. "And anyway, it's a solemn farce. The doctors are bound to say he can't last much longer."

"One hopes for the best," said Arabella, "but of course——"

"He probably wants to talk to us about his will," said Christopher Cordant indifferently.

His two elders frowned, jarred by the frankness of his reference. Frankness awoke strange echoes in that great house ; there was no one, nothing to respond to it. Above-stairs, in Arabella's suite of rooms, it would have been smothered in knicknacks and photographs and the air of narrow gentility they engendered ; in the apartments allotted to Turley—those over-furnished, over-heated rooms where people came and went almost furtively—it would have been sneered at and lured to swift destruction. Only, perhaps, in the airy attic rooms Christopher shared with his books and his thoughts was truth a welcome guest.

"Miriam come yet ?" asked Turley, breaking an oppressive silence. "She'll stay the night, I suppose ?"

"She's in my room—Bissett is looking after her," replied his sister, vaguely. "So dreadfully shabby she's getting, poor dear——"

She broke off as the door was opened and Marpleton, the butler, announced :

"Mrs. Barnaby."

Miriam Barnaby entered the room without the timidity of the poor relation. Shabby she was, undoubtedly, but she carried her shabbiness with an air that made Arabella's expensive laces and superfluous embroideries look ridiculous. She greeted Turley and Christopher with her usual air of eager defiance. It seemed always that she courted patronage, even charity, in order that she might fling it insolently away.

They seated themselves, forming a semi-circle round the writing-table. Conversation flagged—in that atmosphere small talk could not flourish. Each was pre-occupied. Turley was struggling to retain a self-assurance which was slipping from him. Miriam was the prey of dark, inscrutable reflections. Arabella had wandered off into a world of thought that was entirely her own.

Christopher surveyed his companions without interest. He had little in common with them and rarely spent time in their society. Turley disgusted him, Arabella bored him, Miriam filled him with an impatience which he stifled only for the sake of his friendship with her son, Stephen. More than once during the thirty-odd years of his life he had been filled with whimsical amazement that his mother should have been the mother of these three also.

The double doors were thrown open. Marpleton entered and stood by them, erect for all his years, stiff and utterly expressionless. The party of four instinctively rose to their feet. For seconds that seemed minutes they waited thus. Then, slowly emerging from the shadow of the hall, Gregory Blenkiron appeared in the doorway.

CHAPTER II

UNCLE GREGORY

FIFTY years ago Gregory Blenkiron, breaking away from an aristocratic family, had taken service as a common seaman. Ten years after that he appeared as the owner of a small but rapidly-developing line of steamers. No one knew how he had attained that position, but no one was surprised. Thereafter his progress to the rank of shipping king was practically uninterrupted, for he seemed to court opposition and to thrive on it. Throughout his commercial career he had never been known to make a compromise.

At the age of seventy his iron constitution was the envy of men more than twenty years his junior. His piercing intellect was as keen as when he had forced his way up from nothing. And suddenly he had retired, stricken with the deadliest of diseases—cancer in its most virulent form. Ten years ago the doctors had given him three months.

"Sir, your business is to diagnose, not to prophesy," he had snarled at the world-famous specialist. "You will kindly make arrangements for an immediate operation."

"At your age I am reluctant to operate," said the surgeon.

"Then treble your fees to conquer your reluctance," was the answer, and Gregory Blenkiron had had his way.

Since then he had demanded and survived two further operations. Unknown to him, a paper had been read to a medical society on his remarkable case. He had achieved his purpose, but it had been the least victorious of his struggles. His giant frame was bent and wasted. Driven by increasing agony to morphia, he knew that his intellect was keen only when he forced the drug from his brain by means of its antidote, brandy.

His private life was a strange one. His wife had died in childbirth; the son she had borne him, a gentle, romantic

child, grew into the type of man Gregory Blenkiron had invariably sneered at for a fool and treated as a child. Humphrey's dreamy career was checked by his sudden marriage to a Spanish girl of great beauty ; his father, who had arranged otherwise, disinherited him without a trace of emotion, and Humphrey and his wife dropped out of the old man's scheme of life as if they had never been.

The disappearance of Humphrey Blenkiron from the house in Grosvenor Square synchronised with the arrival of the millionaire's sister, a twice widowed lady of a personality insignificant to all but her youngest son, Christopher. The three children born to her in her first marriage made no attempt to understand her. They were of their father's calibre, and he had been Gregory Blenkiron's partner. Christopher, after his father's death, was all her own. For his sake she took up her abode in her brother's splendid home. There, while Christopher was still at school, she died.

If Gregory Blenkiron followed the family life with any sympathy, he gave no sign of it. Miriam left his roof to make a rash marriage, and was deserted within a year ; Arabella grew into simpering middle-age ; Turley prospered and coarsened ; Christopher chose science for his career, gained a Research Fellowship at twenty-four, and had since made the nucleus of a reputation. Their uncle remained unemotionally aware of them all. The house was run like a luxurious hotel of the 'eighties. It sheltered them all ; but it had no life.

Leaning heavily on his ebony walking-stick, his head drooping so that his features seemed thrust aggressively forward, Gregory Blenkiron came slowly into the great room, each step a separate triumph of mind over matter.

Arabella drifted forward to meet him.

" Good afternoon, Uncle Gregory. I hope you are feeling better to-day."

Arabella was not directly in front of him. Unable to move his head, he slowly turned his body so that he could face her.

" Good afternoon, Ara—bella."

At the sound of his voice each member of the party thrilled. The iron personality was manifest in those still vibrant tones. They could feel the difficulty of utterance, knew that each syllable spelt effort.

"Good afternoon, Miriam."

Each in turn gave and received the formal greeting. There were still a dozen feet to travel before Gregory Blenkiron could reach his specially-made chair at the writing-table, and before this final lap he took a short rest on his stick.

"I thank you all for your punct-u-ality," he said. "I apologise for having kept you waiting. I know you are consumed with anxiety to hear the report of my doctors."

"Indeed we are, Uncle Gregory," gushed Arabella. "And I do hope——"

"What do you hope, Arabella? . . . Do you hope that you may long be spared the anxiety of possessing the comparatively large income you may expect at my death? Do you dread the possibility of these pleasant little interviews with me being brought to an end? Control your anxiety for my welfare, Arabella. I will shortly regale you with absorbing anecdotes of my anatomy."

In the silence that followed, Gregory Blenkiron resumed his journey to the chair at the writing-table.

"What the devil are you touching that chair for, sir?" he rasped out at Turley, who had placed the chair at a convenient angle of approach. "Do you presume to treat me as if I were a helpless woman? Put it back."

Turley replaced the chair and Gregory Blenkiron derived pleasure from the difficulty it cost him to settle himself. Exhausted, he sank back in the chair and closed his eyes. Marpleton entered with a brandy decanter and one glass. Perceiving that the heaviness of morphia was already overcoming his master he placed the brass tray on the writing-table with a deliberate clatter.

Gregory Blenkiron started. He knew that he could stave off the next brandy for a little longer. With an effort he regained wakefulness.

"I have taken the opinion of seventeen of the leading specialists," he began, without preface. "They are unanimous in their verdict. My disease is now dormant. It will become neither better nor worse."

He paused, gathering strength for the labour of continued speech.

"The ordinary medicinal dose of morphia," he resumed, "is half a grain to a grain. To deaden the pain of this dormant disease of mine I am now taking thirty grains per

day. To keep my brain clear of the drug for short intervals I drink quantities of brandy. The seventeen specialists have unanimously agreed that my system is strong enough to endure this conflict of poison for—at least—another two years.”

Silence followed his announcement. There was, indeed, nothing that any of them could say. In a sense they were appalled by the opinion of the doctors.

“I want you all to understand my position,” he resumed, the slow, deliberate utterance adding to the grimness of his words. “I am now able to reason clearly when under the influence of brandy. But I can no longer do any kind of work. I can no longer follow the march of civilisation. I have had to give up reading my paper. My employment of a secretary, even, has become a farce. My mental faculties will rapidly diminish and I shall glide into imbecility. . . . But when my reason is destroyed, my instinct to go on living and struggling, which is stronger than myself, will still keep the husk of me alive—me—*me*—an object of pitiable contempt.”

Christopher stared grimly before him. At that moment he felt acute sympathy for the sufferings of the broken tyrant with whom he and his kin had so long been associated. Arabella snivelled. Turley Cave shifted uneasily. Miriam’s breathing came with difficulty.

“I wish to ask you all a question,” Gregory Blenkiron went on. “If any one of you thinks that in these circumstances it is better for me to go on living, let him or her speak. . . .

“You are all silent. Good. We are agreed. No man or woman in possession of sanity could say otherwise than that immediate death is the best thing that could happen to me. But I will not die a suicide. I could not if I wished. Throughout my life my will and brain have been the servants of my instinct to survive in the struggle for existence. That instinct is too strong to allow me to kill myself. And yet I am sensible enough to desire death with every fibre of my being.”

There was a leaden pause. Then—

“Which of you four has sympathy enough to volunteer to kill me within twelve hours from now?”

Gregory Blenkiron had not raised his voice; but those who heard him started as though he had cried the words

aloud. He took grim measure of the consternation he had caused ; slowly, painfully, his eyes sought each face, and each in turn was averted.

“ Will none of you speak ? As a suffering fellow-creature I appeal to you. Unless you hate me with a hatred beyond understanding you must wish me dead. Have you no greatness in your hearts that enables you to put aside the blind traditional horror of killing ? Consider—consider—con-sid-er——”

The harsh voice faded and grew feebler as the drowsiness of morphia conquered the iron will. His eyes closed ; his muscles relaxed. He was falling asleep. As his fingers unclenched a small leaden weight secured to his wrist by a length of string fell from his right hand. The impact of the weight on the parquet flooring startled him into wakefulness. It was his device for knowing when he required more brandy.

The brandy took almost immediate effect. Memory of what he had said came to him, and he was ready to proceed.

“ I am still waiting for your answer. . . . There is no answer. Ha, ha, ha ! We will therefore abandon the pretence that any of you have a shred of affection for me. I will now proceed to *make* you do what I wish to do by the methods I have used all my life against those who hated me.

“ Christopher, be good enough to place the ink a little nearer to me. It is beyond my reach and I require it.”

CHAPTER III

THE DOMINANT DESIRE

GREGORY BLENKIRON took another brandy and waited for its effect. Then he began in the tone in which he had addressed many and many a Board meeting. His lips parted in a smile of sarcasm.

"We come, ladies and gentlemen, to the question of money. Sooner or later, I have found, one always does come to the question of money. My affairs, I am happy to state, are in good order. By the time the death duties and other expenses of my demise have been paid, my estate will consist of a little over one million pounds in five per cent. Government securities. I ask you to reflect on the sum, ladies and gentlemen. One million pounds at five per cent—fifty thousand pounds per annum.

"The question we have now to decide is which of you will accept one million pounds in return for killing me. I shall make no provision for the others. One of you will receive all. The rest of you will receive nothing.

"I am waiting . . ."

An incoherent sound came from Arabella. Turley laughed foolishly. Miriam sat rigidly staring. Christopher frowned.

"The fee, you will admit, is liberal. The margin of risk is grotesquely small. In the history of crime, I will make bold to say, there has never before been a murder in which the victim has been a willing accomplice. There has never before been a murder in which the victim has so set the stage that there will not even be a hue and cry. Human experience proves that even cowardly men will willingly risk their lives for a smaller sum. I am confident that you at least, Turley, will make the attempt. But it is not yet your turn to speak. We will begin with the eldest. You

are the eldest, Arabella. Are you willing to commit murder for a million pounds ? ”

“ Oh,” whimpered Arabella, “ oh, Uncle Gregory, I—oh, how can you—as *if*——”

So completely had Gregory Blenkiron dominated his listeners that at Arabella’s ineffective protest each of the others felt a sense of shock. For these last creeping minutes they had been held as in a vice. The grating voice, the cavernous eyes, the tortured movements had chained their consciences as a nightmare chains the dreamer. Even Christopher, least swayed of all, looked half resentfully at Arabella’s flutterings. It was as though an iron cable, slipping slowly through his hands, had twisted to a knot.

“ Waste no words, Ara-bella, in pretending that your feelings are outraged. They are not. You are troubled because you do not see how you can get the million—and you could put it to such use ! Shall I state in words, Ara-bella, the use to which you could put it ? ”

Abruptly, Arabella ceased to flutter. She stiffened. She gave, strangely, the impression of being trapped. Her pale eyes were fixed in fear.

“ Many years ago you were betrothed,” said Gregory Blenkiron. He drew a sheet of notepaper towards him and began to write. “ Your lover jilted you.”

The brutality of it struck the last vestige of colour from Arabella’s face. She looked suddenly an old woman.

“ Your lover jilted you, Ara-bella, and that after an engagement of no fewer than seven years. Sev-en years ! You were twenty-two, he twenty-four, when you met. He was a clerk on a salary that barely kept him alone. You had no personal income, and at that time you expected none, for you knew that your mother’s second marriage had displeased me, and that while Charles Cordant lived no money of mine would come to her or to any of her children. You and this young man therefore settled down to wait. You waited seven long years, and at the end of it you found that the man you loved had tired of you.”

Christopher half-rose from his chair. Although the dream torpor was strong upon him, the sight of Arabella’s twitching hands moved him to a struggle against his bonds. . . . Slowly the sunken eyes of the old man were turned upon him ; his purpose faltered. He sank back into his chair.

"You are surprised, Christopher, at the extent of my knowledge of Arabella's youth? We have not yet reached the limit of my information. This man, I say, found that at the end of the long period of working and saving and planning, he no longer wished to share the fruits of his toil with the girl he had wooed and won. The seven years, we will suppose, had not been kind to her. . . . You spoke, Arabella? No? I beg your pardon.

"There was, of course, another woman; younger, fresher, with unspent energies—with wealth also, or rather the prospect of it. She proved irresistible. Against her devotion and her charms seven years weighed not at all. *And the marriage was a success.* For the rest of your life you have been haunted by its success, Arabella."

Arabella's thin fingers clutched the arms of her chair. Her lips moved soundlessly.

"You have piled up your hatred against that man and his wife and his child," the merciless tones went on. "When you came to live here with your mother and the pinch of poverty was over, you knew but one longing—the longing for revenge. Such money as you could spare, such power as you could muster, all were flung into the scales against him; against the man who did not want to marry you.

"Need I continue? With a little you have done so much. With a million—think of it! a million—you could bring him back to the state of poverty that was his when you first knew him, Arabella. You could see his wife in rags, his child—listen to what I have written.

"I, Gregory Blenkiron, leave all my property to Miss Arabella Cave, eldest child of my late sister, Emilia Cordant, *née* Blenkiron.' There, Arabella, is my signature. As soon as it is witnessed, this half-sheet of paper becomes a legal will which makes you my sole heiress. It entitles you to one million pounds, and it will be placed in such a position that you will be able to recover it as soon as you have earned your inheritance."

Arabella's gasping sigh mingled with the rustling of paper as the old man pushed the document a little to one side.

"Turley and Miriam, I will request you to sign as witnesses," he said, and held out the pen. Turley, after a nervous glance at his sister, obeyed clumsily. Miriam added her signature mechanically. Not for one moment had her staring eyes left the face of the millionaire.

As she laid down the pen Gregory Blenkiron twisted sideways so that he could look into her face.

A sinister chuckle escaped him.

"Let us now consider your case, Miriam."

Miriam Barnaby retreated backwards, step by step, her hands groping behind her for her chair. Had Christopher not guided her into it she would have fallen. From the opening of the crazy scene her spirit had fluttered in the hands of the fowler; the courage that had been her boast had deserted her long before this moment in which she was called to face the inquisition her sister Arabella had endured so ill.

Gregory Blenkiron, his eyes on her white face, chuckled again.

"Dear me! Dear me! Forgive me, Miriam. My infirmity has made me discourteous. I have neglected to inquire after the welfare of your son. Pardon the omission. Pray tell me how he is?"

Miriam bent her head. That which she feared had come upon her. It was as though she abandoned herself eagerly to a power that could break her like a reed.

"He is very well, thank you, Uncle."

"I am glad to hear it. I—am—glad—to—hear—it. Let me see now, your son is about twenty-two years old, is he not, Miriam? Ah, yes, and he is in good health! Excellent! And what is your son doing for a living, Miriam?"

"He has temporary work in—in the office of a friend." The words were almost a whisper.

"I have no doubt his future is a considerable problem to you and to him," said Blenkiron. "To what university did you send him?"

Miriam cowered. She did not attempt to reply. For the second time Christopher moved jerkily in instinctive protest. For the second time Gregory Blenkiron turned with agonising effort in his direction and quelled him.

"Forgive me, my dear Christopher. I had forgotten that the young man's career depended in those days entirely on the amount Miriam was able to earn by her very excellent paintings. I fear that in the particular year in which Stephen left school there was no great demand for Miriam's very individual work. As a result, Stephen is—a junior clerk?"

A pitiful choking sob came from Miriam. Christopher forced himself into speech.

"Whatever he is now," he said, his voice unsteady in spite of himself, "he will make good eventually. His friends know that."

"Yes, yes." Blenkiron nodded ironic assent. "Of course he will make good—eventually ! Of—course ! When he has squandered his young manhood and the cream of his mental power in a struggle with mean surroundings—when he has rubbed the fine edge off his character by the daily performance of dull routine tasks—when his finer susceptibilities have been blunted in the sordid atmosphere of the counting-house—then, as you say, Christopher, he will make good ; oh yes, he will make good."

"No," said a voice that none recognised as Miriam's. "No. Without money, he will never have the chance to make good."

Gregory Blenkiron drew a second sheet of paper towards him. He went on speaking as though the interruption had not been.

"A million pounds for you and your son Stephen, Miriam. A million pounds ! Is there anything you and he could not do with such a fortune ? Do not pretend to me that you have never before considered such a question, Miriam, for I know a little of the nature of men and women. I will tell you—and you will not deny it—that on many and many a night you have lain awake and prayed that I might die soon and leave you a pittance—no, a moderate legacy—no, a generous income ! You have spent it, in your dreams, you have gloried in the spending of it. And always, in your heart, has been the dread that your boy's father may fare better than you financially and be able to do for Stephen what is beyond your own power to do."

"Miriam," said Christopher, bending towards her, "you are ill. Let me take you away."

She neither moved nor spoke in answer. Her wild eyes followed the progress of Gregory Blenkiron's pen. He reached the last of the few lines and signed his name.

"I, Gregory Blenkiron, leave all my property to my niece, Miriam Barnaby, *née* Cave, second daughter of my late sister, Emilia Cordant, *née* Blenkiron." I have signed away a million pounds in these words, Miriam. A million

pounds to come to you at my death. At—my—death. Turley—Ara-bella——”

Arabella, still grey of face and stiff of gesture, signed as one might sign in a trance. Turley shrugged his shoulders as he wrote his name, with a would-be wink at Christopher. But Christopher was studying the Persian carpet under his feet, and Turley's swagger slithered from him again.

“Turley Cave.”

“Er—yes, Uncle ? ”

“We come now to you, Turley.”

“Yes, sir. How are you going to frighten me ? Hee-hee ? Eh ? ”

The support Turley looked for from the others was still withheld. Miriam's handkerchief was at her lips. Arabella had begun to snivel again. Christopher contemplated the carpet.

“You are not easily frightened, Turley ? ”

“I don't think so, Uncle Gregory.”

“Indeed. In-deed. Then I can announce to you, without apology for the baldness of the news, that by to-day week that pretty bubble you called the Western Coalfields will have been smashed to nothing. My information is un-as-sail-able, Turley.”

Turley was sitting very still. His mouth was slightly open. He looked ridiculous.

“Possibly my warning does not closely affect you, Turley. Possibly—it does. You've taken a risk or two in your time, haven't you ? I do not blame you. You aim at an assured position in the City, and, to attain it, you know in your heart of hearts you will take similar risks again. I am offering you the chance to commute all these risks for one risk and attain your ambition in twenty-four hours.”

“You can dress it up like that, Uncle Gregory,” stammered Turley, in a thin falsetto, “but the fact remains that a civilised man——”

“The looming shadow of disgrace laid for ever,” said Gregory Blenkiron, his slow, deliberate utterance ploughing through the other's words. “With a million pounds a man of your shrewdness and intelligence would be a force in the City. They would make you an alderman, Turley. . . . Sir Turley Cave . . . Sir Turley Cave, Baronet. . . .

“Listen, Turley,” he went on : he took up his pen for

the third time. " 'I, Gregory Blenkiron, leave all my property to Turley Cave. . . . ' Think it over, Turley ; remember your sleepless nights, when you knew that if the market did not turn a point before settling-day there would be a handful of widows and orphans whose securities would have vanished. Remember the dreams in which you travelled again and again the oft-trod road that leads through Carey Street to Parkhurst "

" Arabella, it is your turn to sign as first witness. Then Miriam. This is a document exactly similar to the others. . . . Thank you. . . . Thank you."

They signed at once, unquestioning. His ascendancy over the three children of his late partner was complete.

" Christopher Cordant."

" No, sir."

Christopher had straightened himself, his face flushed but his eyes keen and clear.

" No, sir," he repeated.

With excruciating slowness Gregory Blenkiron moved until he faced his sister's youngest child.

" You wish to be left out of this little gamble altogether ? " The thin lips had parted in a smile. Opposition was as meat and drink to his mental energy.

" To be frank, sir, I've not admired you during this last hour. I think you know that. You did not ask me, I noticed, to witness those three wills you have made. I don't wish you to make a fourth."

Gregory Blenkiron seemed to ponder his line of action. His blood-shot eyes gleamed, but when he spoke his tones were almost gentle.

" For three years, Christopher, you had the hospital experience of a medical practitioner. You are well familiar with death—you have seen it come under your own ministration. It has no superstitious horror for you. Not being a practitioner, you are not hide-bound by the professional etiquette that constitutes their morality."

For a moment the other did not answer. Then—

" I am deeply indebted to you, Uncle Gregory," he said. " You gave me my education and you made it possible for me to choose the work I wanted. For that I will compromise with my conscience to the extent of showing you a method by which you could kill yourself painlessly. Further than that I will not go."

A quick breath came from the two listening women ; Turley moved sharply in his chair. The fleeting sounds brought a delighted malice to the millionaire's eyes. It did not, however, betray itself in his voice.

"That is not going very far," he said. "By my bedside every night is a box of hyoscine tablets. I wake about four o'clock and drop one of them into a glass of water. I have but to drop two, or at most three, and I die painlessly."

"And you have already lost the strength of will to do it?" demanded Christopher. He found that he was struggling for composure. Amazing that an old man should have such power!

"The measure of a man's strength is the measure of his surrender—to the dominant desire of his being," said Blenkiron. "That applies equally to the martyr and the libertine—the statesman and the artist. I can destroy my body in a hundred ways without physical fear. But the moral fear of re-pudiating the desire to live that has dominated me throughout my life is now too great for me. It is more than fear. It is impossibility. It is beyond my imagination to destroy myself."

Christopher's discomfort made him angry.

"An egotistical fancy!" he exclaimed. "It's come out of that morphia needle, Uncle Gregory. If you really and sincerely wish to die you will be able to commit suicide all right if you pull yourself together. Believe me, that dominant desire stuff is very questionable psychology."

"Yet you by those very words have added to its credibility." The harsh voice grew in volume. "I have helped you to become a scientist. I have it in my power to make you a wealthy man. Yet you are so driven by your love of truth that you dare to call me a conceited old fool. I do not resent your words. I would have said the same in your place. There is a kindred feeling between us, Christopher. I like to think of you as my spiritual grandson."

"Thank you," said Christopher, with that in his voice which might have been irony.

"Because of that temperamental kinship I know that you, more readily than the others, will surrender to your dominant desire. . . . The other day you applied for a high power electrical installation to facilitate certain of

your experiments. Your committee refused it on the ground of expense. You cannot carry out those experiments, Christopher.

"That is a situation which must often occur. Your research will very often be hampered, will very often be arrested for lack of money. Your energies will be squandered in begging dunderheads to give you the power to serve them. You will grow bitter in your struggle against stupid material obstacles. Your powers will fail before you have been given the means of exerting them. . . .

"With a million pounds, Christopher"—again the penetrating voice rose and swelled—"you could have the finest laboratory in the world. You could have a staff of trained assistants to save your energy for the big work. Ah, my spiritual grandson, you have laughed at me, but I am laughing at you now! I am watching your eyes. . . . You want that laboratory and those assistants more than you want anything in heaven or earth. It is your dominant desire, and assuredly you will serve it. 'I bequeath all my property to Christopher Cordant, Doctor of Science. . . .' Sign, Arabella. Sign, Turley."

His voice sank. He took up his pen. Christopher, who mentally had framed his protest, was tongue-tied as the others had been. Dazedly he watched the old man write, watched the others sign. He felt chained to his seat, unable to reason. Yet a part of his brain, coherent and critical, was protesting against this domination.

For the first time he understood the secret of the old man's power. He could make one do his bidding by putting himself in such a position that to refuse must plunge him into ridicule and shame. One felt there was some mystic good in him which would make his humiliation an act of vandalism. His power was the traditional woman's power wielded by a strong man. That dominant desire nonsense! The pantomime had obviously affected the others, but he—Christopher Cordant . . .

Blenkiron sank back, exhausted by his effort. His eyes closed. Such was the unconscious influence of his indomitable will that none of them dared to offer him assistance. They awaited his further instructions.

Presently he roused himself and poured out some brandy.

"At the beginning of our conversation," he began again, "I gave you all the opportunity to commit a pious crime

for the sake of any affection you might have had for me. None of you responded. I have therefore used other methods. Arabella's malice ; Turley's greed ; Miriam's mother-love ; Christopher's altruistic ambition. Each of you is dominated, as I am dominated, by instincts stronger than yourselves. Whipped by these instincts, you who hung back shall now compete to do my will. And the manner of your competition shall be this :

" You know the purport of these four legal documents. In four separate envelopes, numbered alphabetically according to your ages, they will be near my person, within reach of my hand, until seven o'clock to-morrow morning—twelve hours from now. The one amongst you who first has the courage to obey what has now become the subconscious purpose of all of you, will destroy all envelopes except the one with his or her letter upon it leaving it where he or she found it. I will so arrange that it shall be conveyed after my death to Markham, my solicitor. Should I still be alive after the time-limit I have stated, I shall myself burn all four documents. As regards the method of your deed——"

He rose laboriously from his chair. The knuckles of his gnarled hands gleamed white on the handle of his ebony walking-stick.

" I have said that in the early morning, somewhere about four o'clock, the pain of my disease wakes me. To stave off the next injection of morphia, I drop a tablet of hyoscine into a glass of water and doze for an hour longer. *One* tablet. More than one would be dangerous ; more than two fatal. . . . It is the custom of all of you—a friendly one, for which I thank you—to come into my bedroom and bid me good night. Doubtless you have before now noticed the glass of water and the box of tablets upon my revolving table. Many times they must have been within reach of your hands."

They were all motionless.

Gregory Blenkiron surveyed them in turn lingeringly. Then he turned himself towards the door, and their furtive gaze went with him down the long room and out into the shadows of the hall.

CHAPTER IV

TO KILL—OR NOT TO KILL

GREGORY BLENKIRON lay back on the pillows, exhausted with the effort of undressing and bathing himself and climbing into bed. For a minute or more he rested. Then he opened his eyes. His hand crept over the back-turned sheet to a revolving mahogany table built in partitions like a fluted cylinder with shelves. Slowly he made the table revolve, a few inches at a time, until the partition that contained the clock was nearest him. Ten o'clock! By the clock was a brandy tantalus.

When he had drunk some brandy he made the table revolve again until the house-telephone switchboard was within reach. He pulled a lever and pressed a button. He pressed the button three times and waited. Less than a minute later his secretary had entered the room and was sitting at the writing-table, ignoring him.

"There is a sealed envelope upon the blotting-pad. Address it to the secretary of the New York offices of the Orissam Line and post it yourself to-night."

"Address this sealed envelope to the secretary of the New York offices of the Orissam line and post it to-night," repeated Miss More in a clear, carrying voice. It was the ritual that had been established between them to guard against the trickery of morphia.

Gregory Blenkiron waited while the envelope was directed and stamped and placed in Miss More's leather case.

"Address four envelopes to Markham, my solicitor."

"Four envelopes to Markham, your solicitor," came the mechanical repetition.

"Mark them in pencil A, B, C, and D respectively and put them on my table."

"Mark them in pencil A, B, C, and D respectively."

A pause, and then the envelopes were laid upon the revolving table.

"Thank you. Wait a moment. . . . Do not go yet."

The secretary waited. She was standing on the farther side of the revolving table, her eyes indifferently upon the many and varied implements that littered it. The seconds passed. Gregory Blenkiron would never be hurried in anything.

"What—is—your—name?"

The girl's head went up in a flash. Her eyes widened and darkened, her lips narrowed to a line of red. An indescribable expression swept her face.

"You know it already. It is More."

"Do not evade me. Your *own* name."

"Jacintha."

"Ja-cin-tha. Ah . . . yes . . ."

They looked intently at one another. The girl's eyes glittered as though aflame, and the eyes of Gregory Blenkiron matched them. The clock ticked on. At last—

"I do not require your services after to-night," said Blenkiron. "I thank you for the efficiency and patience with which you have served me during the last two years. There is an envelope here addressed to yourself. It contains a banknote for five hundred pounds which I request you to accept. You will need a long holiday."

Jacintha More made no movement to take the envelope.

"You do not wish me to work for you at all, after to-night?" she asked, a shrill note in the question. "You will not expect me to come to-morrow?"

"I shall expect you *not* to come to-morrow. We shall not meet again, Ja-cin-tha."

Still she regarded him, her face an ivory mask lit only by the colour of eyes and lips. Then, abruptly, she laughed—a full, round, scornful laugh that echoed through the austere room.

Gregory Blenkiron closed his eyes. He heard her turn and leave him.

As soon as the door closed upon her, he opened his eyes again. She had not taken the money. . . .

On his table were the four wills, folded. With meticulous care he placed each in its proper envelope. It was a lengthy process. When he had finished he again

touched the house telephone. The butler appeared with a tray on which was a tumbler and water in a crystal jug.

He placed both on the revolving table, went to a cabinet and took out a small tin box which he put beside the jug.

"Your hyoscine, sir."

"Seal those four envelopes."

The butler turned his back to his employer. The conditions of his employment were in many respects unique, but he had his dignity. He licked the four flaps and replaced the envelopes on the revolving table.

"If I am—asleep when you come in to-morrow—and you find any of those envelopes still there—send them off at once by express messenger."

"Very good, sir."

"What are those flowers doing on the writing-table?"

"They came this morning with Miss Cave's compliments, sir. I was about to remove them for the night."

The butler waited. He had become expert in knowing when his master intended to speak.

"Put them on this table—and put a chair near them."

"Yes, sir."

Marpleton placed the chair on the farther side of the revolving table, on the spot where Jacintha More had stood and laughed. The tray upon which was the jug, the tumbler, and the box of hyoscine tablets lay next to Blenkiron's hand. Marpleton poured water into the tumbler until it was three-parts full.

"Put the flowers there." Blenkiron indicated the centre of the table.

"Yes, sir."

When the butler had left the room, Gregory Blenkiron turned to the house telephone, pulled a lever and spoke to Arabella Cave.

"I would be grateful, Ara-bella, if you would give me your comp-any for a few minutes."

Then he turned the revolving table so that the hyoscine box and the tumbler of water became invisible to him, blocked from his view by the flowers.

Arabella came into the room, kept her gaze from the braided front of the old man's pyjamas, and unconsciously directed by his domination of her thoughts, took the chair by his bedside. She still looked somewhat haggard, and in her thin throat a pulse beat rapidly.

"Arabella, my infirmity has made me forgetful to the point of discourtesy. I thank you for sending me flowers. Note their position, Ara-bella."

Arabella swallowed.

"Oh, it was your birthday, Uncle Gregory, and I thought perhaps——" The sentence trailed off into a simper.

"Eighty-one," said Gregory Blenkiron. "I ought to have died at seventy-one. What will you do when you are eighty-one, Arabella?"

"I do not presume to think that I shall be spared, though of course——"

She hurried on into an anecdote in illustration of Marpleton's inefficiency. Blenkiron did not listen. It did not matter what she was talking about—it never did matter what she was talking about. What was she thinking about? Oddly, he had the impression that she was thinking about babies. His eyes closed.

Arabella stopped chattering. There was a tense silence. A motor-van passed in the square below and everything in the room vibrated very slightly. The flowers stirred in their bowl, the water stirred in the glass, there was a very faint "chink"; as though tin had touched glass for the space of a heart-beat.

"I—I can see that you are tired, and so I think——" Arabella seemed barely able to speak.

"I would like to see Turley. Do me the favour of ringing up to his rooms."

Arabella obeyed. Her agitation was so profound that she had to repeat the message twice before Turley could catch it. Blenkiron watched her with his cruel smile.

"He will come at once. Good night, Uncle Gregory."

"Good-bye, Ara-bella."

She went out with a curious, dragging tread.

Turley, Gregory Blenkiron noted, had put out his cigar before entering the room, and was at a loss to know what to do with his hands.

"Hullo, Uncle! Still going strong!" said Turley. It was a great deal more familiar and jaunty than his usual greeting. Nerves, no doubt! Blenkiron's smile widened. He tried to discover what Turley was thinking about and failed.

"I remember meeting several years ago a young friend

of yours named, I think, Benham," said Blenkiron, conversationally. "What became of him?"

"He's raking in about five thousand a year at the Bar," said Turley. "Clever chap." He added: "Company Law."

"Company Law!" repeated Blenkiron. "I'm glad to hear it."

Turley, his nervousness growing, confided a wish that he too had gone to the Bar. That assuredly was the life! Seeing all the fellows who had gone wrong and using your brains to help them out of it. He yarned on about Benham. Gregory closed his eyes. Turley's small talk faltered. Gregory had the impression that Turley was staring at the water and the hyoscine and the four envelopes containing the four wills.

Turley's voice grew more insistent, covering every other sound. A log fell asunder in the grate.

"Well, I think you're getting tired, Uncle."

"I would like to see Miriam. Oblige me by ringing up Arabella's rooms—no doubt she will be there. . . . Thank you. . . . You are not used to the telephone, Turley? You sounded hoarse."

"Good-night, Uncle Gregory."

"Good-bye, Turley."

There was a little delay before Miriam came and sat down in the chair on the other side of the revolving table. Gregory Blenkiron, lying back upon his pillows, eyed her, when she came, more cruelly than the others. He had never liked her, suspecting her for a coward, pitchforked by her youthful impulses into a situation in which it was her only pastime to play at pride.

She was playing at it now, head up, eyes hard and bright. The fear that had swept her when she had accepted the monstrous bribe was thrust into the background of her mind. Blenkiron sensed that it was there, and toyed with the idea of calling it forth again; no, he was too tired. He scrutinised her over the tops of the flowers and commented upon her pallor.

"I'm always very pale, Uncle Gregory. . . . What lovely flowers! I thought you disliked flowers or I'd have scraped together and sent you some for your birthday. Though it seems rather silly to send you presents."

"You are very penetrating, Miriam. You can dive

instantly an inch below the surface of things—but you never dive beyond the inch.”

“I never wish to know what is below,” said Miriam, desperately. “Are these the hyoscine tablets? May I look at them?”

“There is little to see,” said Blenkiron. Theatricality bored him. “The tablet dissolves without stirring in about sixty seconds.”

Apparently Miriam’s hand shook suddenly, for—

“Oh, I have spilt the tablets!” she said and laughed hysterically.

“In-deed,” said Blenkiron, with shut eyes. “In-deed.” He could hear her putting the tablets back into the box. The poor fool had tried to startle him just now by her bluntness.

“Are you trying for the million, Miriam?”

He heard her rise, pushing back the chair. He expected more theatricality. It came with a rush.

“No, I am not going to murder you. Though I want to—I want to! I shall hate myself all my life for my failure—and I shall tell my son and help him to hate me. I hate you, Uncle Gregory. I am going. Good night.”

“Good-bye, Miriam.”

Before she had had time to close the door behind her, Christopher came in. He was smoking a pipe, smoking it a little deliberately. He dropped easily into the chair by the revolving table. Blenkiron’s eyelids were drooping.

“Do you mind taking another brandy? I want to talk to you,” said Christopher.

The smile on the rugged face softened into something like friendliness.

“May I pour it out for you, sir?”

“No.”

Christopher’s pipe went out during the tedious delay while Blenkiron manipulated the brandy. Blenkiron was slower than ever. He had the impression that Christopher was thinking of a woman—a woman out of a drawing-room with light hair and child-like eyes.

“The damage you did this afternoon, Uncle Gregory,” began Christopher, “was to state a very plausible case in defence of the theory that the only reasonable motive any of us could have for not murdering you would be the personal risk involved. The others believed you—and

will curse themselves for cowards for the rest of their lives."

"Unless——" hinted Gregory, and chuckled. Christopher ignored him.

"Partly owing to the fact that you spent more money on my education than my mother could on theirs, I am able to tell you that you were talking the rankest moral quackery. A thesis based on the premise that one man has the right to determine the length of another's life is childish."

There was a silence.

"Of course it is childish!" said Blenkiron presently. "There is the very common belief of a sane and balanced man that a particular woman is the most desirable upon earth. There is the belief of a scientist that a new device for cossetting the body will increase the sum of human happiness and help the race in its spiritual progress. At the age of eighty-one they appear to me equally childish. Yet these childish desires are the desires that dominate."

"You've dug yourself into your eighty-one years," said Christopher, impatiently. "I am thirty-six, and, if you like, I have not yet put away childish things. If anything comes of this precious little pantomime of yours, I shall do my utmost to convince an equally-childish judge that you were of unsound mind."

"And to pay your Court fees you will starve your laboratory," grinned Blenkiron. "I have not yet heard of an honest mother selling her infant's food to buy the means of laughing at a corpse. Your moral philosophy, my friend, comes out of a text-book. You are the only human being for whom I feel an affection."

"Forgive me," said Christopher, rising. "I can't stand that sort of thing. Good night, Uncle Gregory."

"Good-bye, Christopher."

When Christopher Cordant had left the room, Gregory Blenkiron's hand crept out to the revolving mahogany table. Slowly he made the table revolve a few inches at a time until the tumbler and the hyoscine tablets were nearest to his hand. Then he switched off the light and went to sleep.

The quiet house grew quieter. The wind rose and shook the black trees in the square. The rain fell.

Four o'clock! Gregory Blenkiron awoke. Guided by a faint flicker from the dying fire he put out a hand to

the revolving table. He opened the hyoscine box and dropped a tablet into the water.

He took the tumbler into his hand and stared long into the velvet shadows that thronged the room.

"The dom-in-ant de-sire!" he muttered, and slowly drained the tumbler. "I wonder?—which—?"

CHAPTER V

THE FOUR SUSPECTS

IT was Christopher Cordant's custom to breakfast early, because he could then breakfast alone. Turley rarely put in an appearance until nine o'clock, and Arabella had a tray sent up to her room.

"Is Mr. Blenkiron up yet, Marpleton?"

The butler looked his surprise.

"Oh no, sir. Mr. Blenkiron rarely rises before ten o'clock."

Christopher opened his mouth to ask another question and shut it again. Marpleton retired.

Christopher took up the paper, but could not focus his attention on it. It had seemed absurd to ask Marpleton if his master was—was still alive; absurd, and a pretty abominable insult to Arabella and Miriam and Turley. And yet—

That sordid business of wills and poisons and dominant desires was enough to make anyone restless. Christopher got up and walked to the window. It gave upon a trim and uninspiring garden, profuse in laurel trees. Christopher scowled at it all.

"Oh—good morning."

He wheeled round. Miriam had entered. Her deeply-ringed eyes spoke of a sleepless night, but she faced her half-brother with all the aggressive defensiveness that was normally hers.

"Christopher, d'you know I think Uncle Gregory was right."

"Do you? Which will you take, Miriam, tea or coffee?"

"Coffee, please. It's so rarely I get it decently made . . . Christopher, don't you think Uncle Gregory wanted to show us what cowardly little fools we are? He knew we would pretend we thought all that talk was the ravings

of a man in morphia. But we don't really. Anyway, I don't. I think it was sound common sense."

Christopher, attending to her wants, made no reply.

"We all know," she added emphatically, "that it's no more murder to kill poor Uncle Gregory than it's murder to put some suffering animal out of its misery. And there was a million for doing it. Is he—has anyone spoken to him yet this morning?"

"No, I gather not. As for his proposition of yesterday, one can't discuss it, really. It's fantastic."

The door opened and Turley entered.

"Morning! Morning! Slept well, Miriam?"

"No, very badly. I dreamt of Uncle Gregory." She crumbled her bread aimlessly and stirred her coffee. "Aren't you early, my dear brother?"

"Yes. I—Is that ham any good, Chris? Didn't sleep any too well myself. Pleasant evening we all had yesterday, eh? Hee-hee! Er—old man still in the land of the living?"

"I don't know," said Christopher shortly. Miriam's feverish eyes went from his face to Turley's back as he stood at a sideboard. Christopher shook himself irritably. All this dramatic nonsense of the day before was making the atmosphere damnably unpleasant. Everybody suspected everybody else of murder . . . that's what it came to.

Again the door opened. This time it was Arabella, pushing a wisp of hair into place.

"Yes, I—not often down to breakfast, but I wanted to be sure they were looking after you properly, Miriam dear." Her eyes, bright as her sister's, roved from one strained face to the other. "How—that is, do you know if——?"

"If anyone's had the nerve to kill Uncle Gregory!" put in Miriam, with jarring flippancy. "I'm sorry I can't enlighten you," she went on, ignoring Arabella's shocked confusion. "I haven't. Christopher? Turley? How you started, Turley!"

"Look here," interposed Christopher, with ominous calm. "Things are going rather too far. It would be better, now that we've let ourselves get into this state of mind, to have Marpleton in and ask him to find out whether——"

The words died on his lips. The door swung open precipitately and disclosed Marpleton. Marpleton panting a little, as though he had run downstairs !

" I beg your pardon, sir," he said to the room in general, " but I fear—Doctor Stanton has been summoned ; I thought it the first thing to do. Mr. Blenkiron——"

A long, groaning sigh came from someone, Christopher never knew from whom.

" I fear that Mr. Blenkiron is dead."

CHAPTER VI

THE WOULD-BE MURDERER

INTO the silence fell Arabella's shriek.

"Dead? *Dead?* Miriam, it was you who——"

As though a hand had been clapped over her mouth she stopped; but Marpleton had backed, looking over his shoulder into the hall behind him.

"If you will excuse me, madam, there is Doctor Stanton, already, I think . . . Yes, it is the doctor. If you will excuse me——"

The door closed upon him and instantly there was hubbub.

"You did it, Miriam, you did it—I saw in your face when you came upstairs again!" Arabella's voice broke hoarsely. "You did it——"

"I? Oh, my God, I wish I had! I wish I had!" Miriam huddled forward in her chair, her hands raised and quivering. "Fool that I was, coward and fool—to leave it for someone else—for Turley——"

Turley's powerful voice rose above hers.

"You accuse me, do you? Do you think I ever intended to compete for his million in that preposterous way? I was just humouring the old fool—I was laughing up my sleeve the whole time—I——"

He broke off. Miriam's eyes had gone past him. So had Arabella's. He followed their gaze and met Christopher's scowl.

Another silence. Then——

"Oh, I see," said Christopher icily. "None of you have done it, so I must be the murderer. That's the word, surely Arabella? So why shirk it? I should not shirk it if it were one of you. . . . But may I suggest, before I am completely indented with the criminal, that Uncle Gregory may have died from natural causes *before* he took his usual solution of hyoscine?"

He made no attempt to hide his biting contempt of them all. They shrank from him, but he had cleared the air.

"Of course! Very probably! We're all off our heads," muttered Turley uncomfortably. "Not that we suspected seriously—I say, oughtn't someone to go up with Stanton?"

There was no answer. Arabella, shivering, crying weakly, was bending down to the fire, stretching thin hands to the blaze. Miriam's head had dropped back against the back of her chair; her eyes were closed.

Christopher shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't think it's necessary," he said. "There's nothing one can do. I think, though, that after Stanton's gone someone ought to go up and destroy those four wills he put on the table next to his bed."

"Yes—yes, certainly," agreed Turley. "Don't want the servants reading them. Difficult to explain——"

Once more there came an interruption. The door was thrown violently open and Jacintha More, ghastly pale, stared at them from the threshold. One hand clung to the door-handle as though its support were indispensable. The other was at her throat.

"Is he—he isn't——?"

She could get no further. Beside the emotion that shook her, the excitement of Miriam and Arabella seemed but a display of the theatricality Gregory Blenkiron had loathed. She raised the hand from her throat to her lips, fingering them as though to force back upon them the power of speech.

Miriam's "Who on earth—?" came simultaneously with Turley's "Well, I'm damned!" Arabella forgot her tears and glared. Only Christopher kept his head.

"It has been a shock to you, I'm afraid, Miss More. We have only just heard the news ourselves."

She still clung to the door. Her great black eyes devoured him.

"Is he——?"

"We shall not know for certain until we have seen Doctor Stanton. I think I hear him on the stairs now. Let me persuade you to come to the fire and sit down. You are cold and—ill."

She offered him no resistance, but he had almost to carry her to the big chair by the hearth, from which Arabella moved pointedly away. Every atom of strength

the girl possessed seemed to have deserted her. Only her sombre eyes and parted lips had kept their life.

"Oh, doctor!"

Arabella had turned eagerly to the door. Doctor Stanton, stout and small, bowed to her, bowed again to Miriam, who dragged herself to her feet; then he nodded to Turley and Christopher. It was a nod of confirmation rather than of greeting.

"Ah, it's true, then!" said Turley, in a subdued tone.

"Oh, *doctor!*" repeated Arabella, and wept again, one eye indignantly upon the pretentious chit by the fire.

"Believe me, Miss Cave—Mrs. Barnaby—it is all for the best," said Stanton ponderously, with professional sympathy for the bereaved. "It is a hard fact with which to reconcile ourselves. Custom—the familiarity of the daily routine—is not easily broken. But as a medical man—solely as a medical man, I may say that no one but an inhuman enemy could have wished poor Mr. Blenkiron another day of life. His physical sufferings only a medical man can know. To that was added the horror, the creeping menace of insanity."

Doctor Stanton was well accustomed to showing sympathy with the bereaved. He was dimly conscious that never before had he been more effective. The whole family, even the girl by the fire whom he did not know—seemed to drink in his words.

"How did he actually die, doctor?" It was Christopher who asked the question.

"Heart failure, beyond a doubt," replied Stanton. "I have made no detailed examination, but——" his hands indicated that the rest of the sentence would be obvious. "We had to expect it daily. The wonder is that his heart stood the combined strain for so long."

Turley murmured something. Arabella wept more loudly. Christopher found his eyes straying to Jacintha More. He was forced to admit that her excessive agitation was odd. She still seemed scarcely able to sit upright in her chair. She could surely not have had such a strong liking for her employer, reflected Christopher drily.

"——his great age," Stanton was saying. "Eighty-one, was he not? And at seventy-one—ten years ago—he was stricken with his terrible disease. How he ever——"

"At what time during last night did he die?"

The question came from Miriam, so suddenly and harshly uttered that the little doctor jumped.

"At what time? Dear lady, that is difficult to say, with any degree of exactitude."

"It surely doesn't matter," said Turley, with an apprehensive glance at Miriam, still standing dramatically upright.

"But your butler tells me," continued Doctor Stanton, "that Mr. Blenkiron was in the habit of taking a tablet of hyoscine somewhere about four o'clock. I noticed that the tumbler provided for that purpose was empty."

"A-a-h!"

At the strange, slow sound Jacintha More turned in her chair. Turley and Arabella did not move at all. Even Christopher felt shaken. Uncle Gregory had taken his hyoscine and—and died?

"I—I don't think I quite follow your point, Mrs. Barnaby," ventured the doctor. "You said——"

Miriam made no attempt to enlighten him. She brushed past him and made her way to the window where she stood tearing at the heavy curtain.

"My sister has a fear that Uncle Gregory may have made a mistake and taken an overdose of hyoscine," volunteered Christopher, as casually as possible.

Doctor Stanton shook his head.

"Oh, most unlikely, most unlikely, dear lady! Had Mr. Blenkiron doubled the dose it would not have been fatal. Had he *trebled* it—well, of course, that might have been serious; but to take three instead of one—oh, most unlikely, most unlikely! I beg you not to occupy yourself with such a distressing thought. . . . I fear I can be of no further assistance here, Mr. Cave. I will not intrude longer. I cannot sufficiently express"—he was bowing himself out—"deep sympathy——"

The door closed.

Miriam laughed, with an ominous break in the sound. Panting a little, Arabella turned to the secretary.

"If you have quite recovered, Miss—er—I really think——"

The girl ignored her. Her eyes were upon Miriam's silhouetted figure with something uncanny in their intensity. As Miriam walked heavily back to her old place at the table, the dark gaze went with her, step by step.

"Let me put you into a taxi, Miss More." The suggestion came from Christopher.

"Who *is* this young lady?" asked Miriam of Turley. She did not trouble to make it an aside.

"Uncle Gregory's secretary—and I must say I can't see why——"

"What is it, Miss More?" cut in Christopher.

She had risen to her feet, her hands held lightly curved as though she would gather within their grasp the tributes of those who were waiting for her to go. Under the white velvet of her skin colour was creeping back. Her eyes blazed.

"Miss More, what *is* it?"

She was looking at Miriam. It seemed an age before she spoke.

"You——" she said, "you don't believe his heart-failure was due to his illness. You believe still that it came from an overdose of hyoscine. And you are right. . . ."

"I tell you, you are right! I know—I know! It was his way of escape. He feared me so much that he killed himself rather than wait till to-day when he knew that I was going to kill him. . . . Be quiet, and I will tell you why. I was going to kill him because he killed my mother. She was his son's wife."

"Humphrey's wife!"

"Humphrey's wife. I am—I was Gregory Blenkiron's granddaughter. And I was going to kill him to-day."

CHAPTER VII

“ A MILLION TO ME ”

“ **O**F course ! ” breathed Christopher.

He was not in the least surprised. Humphrey's daughter ! His thoughts raced ; they hammered at his brain so loudly that he heard the babble of incredulity around him as one hears the constant murmur of a river.

“ I don't believe it ! ” Arabella's breathless squeak was ludicrous. “ I don't believe it ! How are we to know *who* she is, Turley ? Oh dear, and coming just after poor uncle's death—Turley ! ”

“ You have proofs of your identity, I suppose, Miss—er—— ? I mean, it's all very vague, isn't it ? You've got a birth certificate and so on ? ”

“ Oh, what does that matter ? ” Miriam's impatience was edged with hysteria. “ She can be anyone she likes, as far as I care ! The point is that she was going to murder Uncle Gregory to-day. Why to-day ? Why not—last night ? *How do we know she didn't ?* ”

Jacintha flung up her hand and instantly they were quiet. Just so might Gregory Blenkiron himself have quietened them.

“ You are foolish. Be silent ! Cannot you see that I am dressed as for a feast ? ” She spread wide her arms, and Christopher noted that her dress, though dark as always was to-day of a rich and supple velvet, girdled with jet. “ Ever since I knew—about my mother, I have planned and schemed for my revenge. I had to wait so long ! It was sometimes as if to-day would never come. And now—— ” Her face twisted passionately. “ He has escaped me ! ” she cried again. “ He discovered who I was and he was afraid. Yesterday evening he dismissed me ; I laughed at him. I thought him stupid—I thought him—

oh, but he was clever ! He knew I would not strike before to-day——”

“ But why ? Why to-day ? ” Christopher asked unsteadily. She wheeled towards him.

“ She died on this day, twenty years ago ! You still don’t understand ? It was sworn in her blood—for me—by one who loved her, that I would pay the debt at the end of twenty years. The blood-feud runs like that, always. And as for proof ”—she wrenched at a thin gold chain that hung about her neck—“ here, see ! There is a locket on this. Open it—no, let me—you knew my father ? You recognise him ? ”

She had come close to Christopher. Her magnificent eyes were raised to his ; her trembling hands were thrusting the locket at him. Gently he drew back.

“ I require no proof. I believe your statements, all of them. Except that it is difficult to believe that Uncle Gregory was worthy of such hate as you have felt. He was harsh, but he did not war with women.”

She threw back her head, and her laugh made him clench his teeth.

“ How little you knew of him ! How little ! One day I will tell you what he was, what he did. Ah, wait——” she stepped aside and tossed the locket towards the others as though she tossed them a toy to keep them good. “ I have other proofs, but if you knew my father—and I can answer questions if you wish to ask them. I am quite calm now. ” She went back to Christopher. “ You have always been kind. You, I think, will understand. The day has come and I cannot work out the blood-promise. I feel—destroyed. To kill him, as he killed her, was my—my dominant desire.”

Christopher passed his hand over his eyes. That echo of horror was unbearable. . . . He found himself near the window. He leant his forehead against the cool pane and tried to disentangle the web of doubt that was spinning them all in, like foolish flies. The dominant desire of this strange, compelling woman had been to kill. . . . And Uncle Gregory had known ? And let her work for him until the eleventh hour ? Incredible !

He felt that she was watching him. It was an effort not to turn back to her. . . . He heard Turley clear his throat.

"This miniature that you've let us see, Miss—er—Blenkiron, it's very interesting; undoubtedly Humphrey. And then there's his name on the back, isn't there? Of course, just as a matter of form, there are other proofs, as you say, but—er——"

And Arabella was crying again.

"Really, it's all so amazing and I'm so upset I hardly know——"

It was Miriam's turn. Christopher listened and finally looked round. Miriam was staring at Jacintha as she had stared before. She said nothing.

Christopher's mind leapt back a link or two. There were those four envelopes on the old man's table. They oughtn't to lie there.

Again, as though in answer to a summons, Marpleton entered.

"Mr. Blenkiron's papers have been transferred to his writing-table, sir," he said to Turley. "If you will inspect them?"

Turley started.

"Ah, yes. Yes. I suppose the envelopes that were on the revolving table are amongst them."

"Envelopes, sir?"

"Addressed to Markham, the solicitor, and marked A, B, C, and D"—and at Jacintha's laugh the grey-haired retainer blinked and stared.

"Er—yes. Very probably."

Turley was ill at ease.

"You found them, Marpleton?"

"No, sir. Not four envelopes. There was only one, addressed to Mr. Markham. I think there was a pencil marking in the corner, but I naturally did not study it closely. I despatched the letter, sir."

Audibly Turley caught his breath. Arabella swayed a little. Miriam smiled a crooked little smile and stared at Jacintha. Christopher forced himself to step in.

"He had given you orders over-night to take a letter from his table?"

"Yes, sir. When I went as usual at ten o'clock last night, he pointed to four letters on his table—they were not in a pile, but spread out. He said: 'If I am asleep when you come in to-morrow—if you find any of those envelopes still there—send them off at once by express

messenger.' And there was one letter there, sir, at eight. Only one."

Turley gripped the back of an upright chair and tilted it. It fell back with a crash and Arabella stifled a gasp with her handkerchief.

"When you went in to Mr. Blenkiron at eight and took the letter was he—did you believe him to be asleep?"

"Certainly, sir. He liked me to come in every half-hour or so, from eight o'clock onwards, just to see if he wanted anything, though my orders were never to rouse him fully until ten. But this morning, the third time I went in, I thought he looked—different, so I——"

"Yes, thank you. Thank you, Marpleton. You are sure there was only one envelope?"

"Positive, sir. Thank you." Marpleton withdrew.

"One envelope was left!" The words burst from Arabella in spite of herself. "One—one—*whose*?"

"What does she mean?" asked Jacintha of Miriam.

"I think you know!" sneered Miriam.

The girl turned to Christopher with a little gesture of bewilderment.

"What do they mean?"

He found it impossible to answer her. He found it impossible to endure for a second longer the sensation that the strands of a web he could not see were tightening round him.

"Turley, I'll telephone Markham," he snapped. "Until we know which envelope was sent, will you see that no explanations are attempted? Good."

He made for the door. Opposite the breakfast-room, facing it across the hall, was the room the secretary had used. He knew he would find a telephone there. Yes, on the writing-table

He lurched into a chair and pressed his hands to his head.

Visions of the long scene in the ballroom came to mock him. Arabella, Miriam, Turley, cowed and crumpled; himself dominated into acquiescence! The bribe—the conditions, "Which of you will accept a million pounds for killing me?" The rasping tones echoed in his memory. And then, later, his conversation with Gregory Blenkiron in the bedroom; his own "Good night, Uncle Gregory," and the answered "Good-bye, Christopher." Good-bye.

He'd been sure, then, that terrible old man, that one of them at least was to be bought ?

" I wonder," groaned Christopher, in the silence of the room that had been the secretary's. " I wonder—which ? "

Arabella ? Miriam ? Turley ? Malice and greed could be strong as hate. Gregory Blenkiron knew that. Hate ! Christopher groaned again. Jacintha had hated to the death. To-day, she had said, was appointed for the payment of the debt. But then——

Jacintha ? Turley ? Miriam ? Arabella ? Christopher took up the receiver.

" Gerrard, one-o-nine-three ? "

" Gerrard, one-o-nine-three ? Mr. Markham's office ? . . . Yes, please. Mr. Markham, I have to tell you that my uncle, Mr. Blenkiron, died during the night. . . . Thank you. Yes. . . . Yes, he didn't get much out of life ; it's a release for him, but of course it'll make a great change all round for us. . . . Er—I gather that he wrote to you last night and that the letter was sent to you by messenger this morning. You received it ? No, I don't know the contents but I—we wondered whether it was a new will ; he made—more than one. What ? *What ?* "

Christopher Cordant sprawled forward in the chair.

" It can't be. You're— Look again. I beg your pardon. Please look again. There's been a mistake—there's—Mr. Markham, is the envelope marked ' D ' ? It is ? . . . No, nothing. Thank you. Thank you. Good-bye."

Christopher hung up the receiver with care. With equal care, he rose.

Opposite him Jacintha Blenkiron was standing, leaning a little forward. Her eyes were veiled.

" It contains a will, that envelope ? " she said softly. " Do you know to whom he left his money ? "

He looked at her, his hands making odd, vague gestures over which he had no control. He felt little surprise that she should have followed him. He sensed a change in her, or rather a return to her normal self ; the self that he had known and admired, in his impersonal way, for some time. It was as though a cold strength went out from her ; he had felt it before and met it with a challenge ; but now he saw it as an iron chain, linking her to her kinsman, the living and the dead. Gregory Blenkiron's granddaughter ! And

she asked him to whom the Blenkiron fortune had been left.

Christopher took up the telephone and placed it in the exact centre of the blotting-pad.

"To me. He has left a million pounds to me for murdering him. But I did not murder him, Jacintha."

CHAPTER VIII

THE FOUR JACKALS

“**N**O. You did not murder him ? ”
Jacintha placed her hands palm downwards upon the table and leant heavily upon them ; the veins gleamed purple under the velvet skin and the finger tips grew rosy.

Christopher found himself staring at the sculptured beauty of those hands. . . .

“ I insult you in asking you that ? But then, I do not yet fully understand this talk of murder and money, although I addressed the four envelopes for—for him. Tell me.”

His eyes still upon her hands, he told her.

“ He was ill, as you know. He wanted to die, and he wanted one of us to kill him. When we refused he said he would leave a million to the one who would give him what he wanted. He tempted us.”

“ Not you.” Her voice throbbed suddenly.

“ Oh . . . I can’t remember.” Christopher lifted a paper-weight and dropped it. “ Anyway, I let him make a will in my favour, too. You know that he had the four wills in four envelopes on the table next to his bed. Before he went to sleep he gave us each—a chance to earn the million. Sounds insane, doesn’t it ? ”

The pointed fingers, pressed against the rosewood table, twitched and curved.

“ To many, perhaps, but not to me ; because I believe still that his death was planned so that he might escape me. He was afraid to kill himself and he was even more afraid of me. When he gave me to understand, last night, that he knew who I was and what I was going to do when the hour came, I was startled, but I did not fear that I should fail. He dismissed me, and I laughed. I had a key

to this house—I thought he had forgotten it. I used it to-day. . . . Well, I did not kill him. Nor you, Christopher. Nor did he die before he drank his hyoscine."

Christopher dragged his gaze up to hers. Her eyes were still veiled. He noticed a small scar over one brow just visible above the arch. He wondered whether Uncle Gregory had caused it, whether it had hurt, and whether she would have forgiven the blow if it had left no mark. . . .

That final speculation, so idly fantastic at such a time, shook him back into himself. Death and destruction were in the house, and all he could contribute was lethargy of mind and body! He swung round and made for the door, then, remembering Jacintha, checked himself. He looked back at her, frowning.

"I beg your pardon. It's such an astonishing thing about that will that it quite knocked me out for the moment. But I must tell the others." He thrust out his underjaw savagely. "We've all got into such an appalling state of mind that I don't doubt they'll take it for granted that I—earned—Uncle Gregory's million."

"One of them will be only pretending to think so," said Jacintha.

Christopher's frown deepened. He regretted now that she had come to know so much; that he himself had amplified and explained the amazing situation. And he had used her Christian name unbidden.

"Absurd!" he snapped. "If Araby or Miriam, or Turley had done it, why should the will in *my* favour be sent to Markham?"

She shook her head as though she despaired of his obtuseness, but her lips smiled a little as though she liked him for it. She moved past him to the door.

"Come," she said.

Christopher laughed shortly. Half an hour ago she had been a secretary. Now, with a right he could not question, with a naturalness he could not resent, she was taking the lead in a family crisis. Humphrey's daughter! There was nothing of Humphrey in her, anyway. He followed her from the room.

Over her shoulders he saw the others, standing round the fire in the hall. Arabella still wept, but Turley and

Miriam had abandoned all pretence of distress. Their eyes were alive with curiosity.

"The heavens may fall but the breakfast-things must be cleared," said Turley, with an irritable jerk of the head towards the morning-room.

Jacintha looked at him coldly.

"We cannot talk here," she said. "We had better go in there——" Her gesture indicated the reception-room in which they had gathered the evening before at Gregory Blenkiron's request.

Miriam, always moved by the setting of the stage, cried out at the idea. Arabella also shivered her reluctance. But Turley shepherded them in on Jacintha's heels.

"Did you get through?" he asked Christopher in a confidential whisper.

"Yes," said Christopher. "Miss Blenkiron is waiting for us."

Turley hesitated, pulled at his tie, then strode into the reception-room. Christopher followed him, closed the door, and looked round the vast room for Jacintha.

She was in front of the hearth, staring up at a painting in oils of Gregory Blenkiron which hung above the mantelpiece. From the rich dark dress her throat rose up, slender as a flower and pale as ivory; her hair and eyes were lustrous in the half-lights of the place; her mouth was folded tightly as though upon a secret. Her beauty flaunted itself at last, impatient of repression, self-sufficient, aloof, absorbed.

Arabella was goaded into protest.

"Really, Miss Blenkiron, I do think that at such a time you might have left us!"

Jacintha did not move.

"Do you? Why?" Her voice had the ring of metal.

Arabella collapsed, whimpering an appeal to Turley and Miriam. The three of them were standing in a semi-circle according to age. In that house, whenever a crisis drove them to spontaneous behaviour, precedence laid hold of their subconsciousness and drilled them. While Christopher joined them, Jacintha moved through the semi-circle and passed under the two chandeliers to the writing-table in the far corner.

"The will that was sent to Markham was—the one in my favour," said Christopher.

As he rapped out the words he scrutinised each of the three faces turned to him. "One of them will be only pretending," Jacintha had prophesied. Christopher raked them with his gaze, and it seemed to him that Turley and Arabella both expressed genuine and unqualified amazement.

Miriam's sneering smile and shrug explained themselves as she wheeled on Jacintha.

"Very neat, Miss Blenkiron. If Christopher's inheritance is not upheld by the Courts, you step into the property; you're the only direct relative. *Very neat!*"

Turley and Arabella had recovered speech. They drowned Christopher's angry protest.

"Christopher, *you?* You did it? Oh, to think of it! That you should——"

"Shut up, Araby. We were all on the verge of doing it. Why didn't you admit it at once, Chris?"

"Because he did not do it," came from Jacintha.

She was sitting in Gregory Blenkiron's chair—sitting very much as he had sat, one elbow on the writing-table, the other gripping the arm of the chair. They all drifted towards her, though she had not raised a finger to beckon them nearer.

"Of course he didn't! You have reason to know it!" Miriam flung at her. "You had a latch-key; you could come and go at any hour of the day or night. You—as the secretary—knew about the wills. Oh, you've been quite clever!"

"I believe—and I don't care who hears me say it——" began Arabella, but Turley snarled her into silence.

"I suppose you would inherit if your grandfather were made intestate?" he asked Jacintha. He was trying to speak conversationally, but his voice threw a rasping interrogation.

Christopher was getting angry. He could see that the three had abandoned their struggle for dignity. Before each had been dangled a fortune, and from the snatching hand of each the fortune had been slipped away by blind chance—blind chance as they all knew in their heart of hearts. Dignity, morality, and tradition faded out before the chimera of that million. God, how brutally right Gregory Blenkiron had been!

"Will you all have the goodness to listen to me?" he

rapped out like a bully. Jacintha laughed. Christopher knew that the laugh was justified and became angrier. He was angry enough now to hold himself in leash.

"Miss Blenkiron *will* inherit," he told them. "I shall refuse to touch a penny. Since you are of opinion that I killed Uncle Gregory, explain my refusal to pocket the million on the grounds of cowardice, or the more definite fear that you will all do your utmost to get me hanged."

"No, no, no! Look here——" began Turley weakly. He dropped into the seat he had occupied on the previous evening, subconsciously inducing Miriam and Arabella to do the same. "No, look here, Chris, we—I, at any rate, don't believe that you killed Uncle Gregory. I was startled, I didn't realise—— What exactly are you going to do?"

"It's very simple. I'm going to explain to Dr. Stanton what happened round this table yesterday afternoon and warn him not to give a death certificate. There will be an inquest and I shall repeat the facts to the coroner."

There came the usual sneering laugh from Miriam. Turley and Arabella looked at each other. Jacintha turned a little in her chair and looked up through her lashes into Christopher's face.

"The coroner will laugh!" said Turley, uncomfortably.

"In the very unlikely event of the coroner laughing," said Christopher, "in that very unlikely event, I shall myself oppose probate of the will and demand fullest possible investigation by the police. That's all. I'm going round to Dr. Stanton now."

"But they'll hang you—they'll hang you," squeaked Arabella.

"Nonsense!" said Christopher. "They won't even charge me. There are dozens of ways in which it might have happened. How that particular will came to be sent to Markham I don't know—and for the present purpose I don't care. Uncle Gregory might have seen that the whole thing was absurd—he might have begun to tear up the wills and have been seized with a heart attack before he tore up the fourth."

"In which case," cut in Miriam, "the torn fragments of the other wills would be found on the floor."

"For all we know the fragments *are* there at this moment," said Christopher coolly. "I'm not going into

the innumerable possibilities of the case. The coroner will do that."

"No, no, no!" stammered Turley again. "You can't—after all—— For one thing, you're under a misapprehension about our—our point of view, Araby's and mine, I mean. We don't think for a moment you——"

"Indeed no, Christopher!" snivelled Arabella. "Really, it never entered my head. I didn't mean to convey——"

"Thank you," said Christopher stiffly. Curiously enough, he believed their assurances. They all held him guiltless, in spite of the will. For a moment his heart warmed to them because this last shred of faith was left in them—because they were his kinsfolk. Then—

"I have my own opinion and I shall continue to hold it," muttered Arabella, and Christopher saw that her eyes, gleaming between their red rims, were upon Miriam.

And Miriam was looking, as she had looked from the first, with flaming scorn upon Jacintha.

And Turley? He was fidgeting, his eyes half-closed, but Christopher received the impression that he suspected Arabella. . . .

Christopher's soul sickened within him. They believed him guiltless only because their instincts apportioned their distrust amongst themselves, and they were the slaves of instinct. They paid him no tribute. He believed them all innocent of murder; they merely each thought it much more likely that another than he should have committed the crime.

He found himself staring down into the dark and smouldering fires that were Jacintha's eyes. It was as if she read his thoughts and told him again, "One of them in only pretending." Ah! She was putting it into words.

"I once read a mystery story—an old-fashioned story but well written," she said. "Two people were suspected of a crime. An investigator discovered that each believed the other was guilty. That established the fact—in the mind of the investigator—that those two people were both innocent."

"Well?"

"Well—Christopher—if we had all read that book we might all try to establish our innocence by announcing that we each suspect one particular person. Mrs. Barnaby, for instance, makes it clear that she suspects me. Therefore in your opinion Mrs. Barnaby must be innocent. Miss

Cave seems to suspect Mrs. Barnaby—Mr. Cave no doubt also runs an especial mistrust——”

The three of them were on their feet now, gesticulating, protesting, angrily conscious that their anger but proved her points. Her voice rose above their hubbub, carrying clearly to Christopher, grimly outside the circle.

“That is your first reason for acquitting them, Christopher, and it’s a fallacy. Your second reason is that the will in your favour was sent, which proves—to you—that none of them”—her gesture indicated the three as though they were part of the furniture of the room—“could have killed him. And that’s a fallacy, too, for one of them may have been just clever enough to see that the safe thing to do was to murder the old man and send *your* will in. You are the only one who would certainly refuse the inheritance, at least in its entirety. You would either share it, and a quarter of the fortune unquestioned would be a far better bargain than the whole million tainted with fear—or you would demand an inquiry, as you are actually doing. The very probable result of such an inquiry would be the verdict that Gregory Blenkiron was of unsound mind, that he must be considered to have died intestate—and again, the property would be shared.”

“Speak for yourself!” cried Miriam, shaking with passion. “*You* could have murdered Uncle Gregory and sent Christopher’s will to Markham for exactly the same reasons, and as Uncle Gregory’s granddaughter you’d do better than we when it came to sharing! It’s what I’ve been saying all along——”

“That’s so,” nodded Turley. “You’re in much the same hole that we are, Miss Blenkiron.”

“I should not dream of denying it,” flashed Jacintha. “All I will ask you to note is that *I* am not perpetually attempting to focus suspicion on someone else. On the contrary, I have said to you all—and will say again at any public inquiry Christopher sets afoot—that I meant to kill my grandfather and would have done it if I could. . . . Sit down again, all of you. I will tell you why I wished to kill him.”

Christopher felt as if he had been sitting in a fast-moving car to which the brakes had been suddenly applied. . . . Blenkiron’s granddaughter! He sat down. They all sat down.

"Perhaps you do not know that my father died less than two years after I was born," she said. "His death swept my mother from poverty to—destitution. She had been giving lessons in Spanish; her health broke down and she could find no means of supporting herself and me. Twice she appealed to my grandfather, Gregory Blenkiron, and twice she was refused even so much as a loan.

"I must explain that she had quarrelled with her own father when she married and came to England. In Spain quarrels go deep and far. My mother was almost starving before she could bring herself to write to her father and beg of him the necessary money with which to return to Spain. He was merciful. He could not bring himself to forgive her, but he could not let her want. He sent her money, and with me—a child of three—she came back to her old home.

"It was a lonely, ugly place, that had once been a house of some dignity; for my mother came of a good family, and neither she nor her father ever forgot their lineage. This, I see, surprises you. I have been given to understand, since I have worked in this house, that Gregory Blenkiron's son married a Spanish dancer of no repute. Probably you were all told the same?"

In the little silence Turley shifted uncomfortably.

"My mother took up again her old life. There was a gulf, you must understand, between her and her father. Afterwards she blamed herself much that she had not tried to bridge it. She thought that his preoccupation with other matters was assumed as a convenient barrier. Afterwards she learnt that his thoughts were in truth filled with many anxieties, for this old house in which he lived was perilously near the Qualtas hills. And the Qualtas was a brigand stronghold."

She paused, surveying them coldly in turn.

"Do not trouble to mask your incredulity," she invited them, with an indescribable scorn in voice and smile. "You are thinking—'Theatrical foreigner! As if we'd swallow stuff like that!' Oh, but why deny it? All well-read English men and women know that brigandage is over, buried with vendetta and ordeal by fire and duelling and all such comic-opera humbug. Gregory Blenkiron, my grandfather, was well-read; he knew that brigands were all nonsense. They no longer existed in England, therefore

they could not exist elsewhere. Not even in Spain, which, where it is not barbaric, is mediæval.

“Imagine the ironic disgust of my grandfather when—some eighteen months or so after my mother’s return to her native country—he received a letter from her stating that she had fallen into the hands of the Qualtas robbers. They had surrounded the house one night, bound and gagged the servants, and demanded of her and her father the key to the cellars. There had been a rumour, you see, that gold and silver plate, jewels and money were stored down there. A wild enough rumour—for if such glories had existed my mother and her father would assuredly have fared better than on dry bread and olives, which too often was their only nourishment.

“The brigands had been given the keys, according to my mother’s letter, and had ransacked the place; they found only a cask or two of the wine kept for guests, which they had emptied. It had made them quarrelsome with the master of the house, offensive to the women. I will not weary you with details. My mother told Gregory Blenkiron that in the ensuing fracas her father had been shot and she herself taken with her child into the Qualtas in the hope of ransom.

“She named the ransom. In *pesetas* it sounded a fortune. In English money it was less than the fees my grandfather would pay to one of his doctors in one year. My mother made it clear to him that if the ransom were not paid her lot would become one of such shame that death were preferable. . . .

“Gregory Blenkiron replied as you would have replied.” The smouldering gaze swept the strained faces. “He had read, as you have, exactly such tales as my mother unfolded to him in her letter. He knew better, therefore, than to take seriously her desperate appeal. He wrote to her with elaborate courtesy. ‘Madam: As a boy I read tales of adventure. As an old man, I find them tedious. Nevertheless, your imagination is as creditable to you as is my common sense to me.’

“And so, when the time allowed had expired, the ransom my mother awaited did not arrive. Only this—most courteous—letter. . . .”

Christopher lifted his head and looked. His throat was

dry, his breathing unsteady. She met his eyes and spoke as though she and he were alone.

"Some months later she got away. They did not guard her closely, you see, after— She took me down to the plain, to an old servant who had been her nurse, and left me there. My memory begins in Pinar's little home. A very poor home : so poor that my mother, who longed to die, had to live on and earn money for my keep. For a year and more she sent the pitiful little sums that bought me bread. So small they were—your servants would scorn them. You see, she was now what Gregory Blenkiron had made her—a Spanish dancer of no repute."

In the square outside a child shouted suddenly. Miriam stifled a scream. Jacintha still looked at Christopher.

"I weary you. . . . There is so very little more. One day some Americans—tourists—saw me playing with Pinar's goats. These people were kind, and she told them my story. They obtained permission to take me away, educate me, give me reasonable comfort and a start in life. So that my mother was released from hell. . . . Pinar was with her when she died. And afterwards she took an oath—for me——"

The low, rich tone wavered. The lashes hid the night-dark eyes. For the first time Christopher noticed that she had not moved her position by one inch whilst she had been speaking. She had inherited that from Gregory, that sinister immobility. It repelled yet fascinated. . . . Christopher's mind was clearing. If she told this story to the police——"

Arabella was sniffing.

"Of course it's all very dreadful," she said, "but I'm sure no one could have guessed——"

"Point seems to be," boomed Turley, with jarring abruptness, "that if Miss Blenkiron's going to let everybody know what her reasons were for wishing poor old Uncle Gregory dead, this public inquiry of yours, Chris, is going to be the very devil for her. I suppose these American friends of yours could be made to bear out your story to a point, Miss Blenkiron? You don't seem to realise what the police are. They'll get hold of these people——"

Jacintha bent her head. Her eyes were still closed.

"Miss Blenkiron is quite aware of the danger she will

be in *if* Christopher persists in his campaign," said Miriam acidly.

Christopher got up, kicking his chair aside, and went to the window. Miriam's attitude, he felt, was despicable, and yet it was so perspicacious. Jacintha might have no motive in dwelling so insistently upon her hatred for her grandfather. It might be spontaneous, or done from mistaken courage. All the same it had the effect of pulling him up pretty sharply. It was one thing to appease his own pride by demanding a public inquiry, quite another to place Blenkiron's granddaughter in an extremely unenviable position; a position of public odium, possibly of danger. He strode back to the writing-table.

"You can surely account for your movements last night?" he asked her sharply.

She did not look at him.

"I can," she answered faintly. "But I have no witnesses. I left here shortly before eleven and went straight back to bed. I cannot prove that I did not get out of bed half an hour later. I cannot prove that I did not murder my grandfather. And as I have said, I do not fear to let the whole world know that I intended to murder him."

"This is maddening!" exclaimed Christopher.

"No, it is only interesting," said Jacintha. "It shows me what a clever man my grandfather was. He was too clever for me. He knew about me when I thought he didn't. I was to him, just a secretary. And now, even though he is dead, he is aiming a last blow against me and my mother. And he is delivering the blow—through his heir."

"Look here, we're getting superstitious!" cut in Turley. "I don't stand for that kind of thing. Striking from the grave and all that—penny plain, tuppence coloured. Can't we look at it squarely?"

"If you make no statement at the inquiry, Jacintha," Christopher snapped, "the most probable outcome of it all will be to prove that Uncle Gregory was of unsound mind and that he can be considered to have died intestate."

"Upon which his granddaughter gets the lion's share of everything," came inevitably from Miriam.

"Your malice confuses you, Mrs. Barnaby," returned Jacintha evenly. "As I have stated the issue, I get nothing either way. If there is an inquiry I shall say in

public all I have said to you in private. You, as a hostile witness, will stress the fact of my latch-key and my familiarity with the house. I cannot prove an alibi. Uncle Gregory's will in Christopher's favour may be proved invalid, but do you think it certain that I shall still be—alive—to take the lion's share of anything ? ”

Miriam twisted her handkerchief and was silent. There was panic in her gaze, as there had been when, across the same table in the same room, she had faced Gregory Blenkiron and suffered and struggled and acquiesced at his command.

“ And alternatively,” continued Gregory Blenkiron's granddaughter, “ if there is no inquiry, Christopher remains the heir. Do I gain by that ? ”

“ You will not volunteer your statement if there is no inquiry, then ? ” cut in Christopher, harassed.

“ No. I do not *want* to be arrested for murder ; only, if murder is suggested—by your demand for an inquest—I shall not try to shield myself.”

Again Christopher wrestled with his thoughts. This girl was accused by Miriam of one sordid calculation after the other ; with a cruel scorn that Gregory could not have bettered, she had wrung from Miriam a sullen respect. But, in so doing, she had placed her own throat beneath his heel. If he moved forward on the path he would have chosen, he trampled on her. . . .

He passed his hand across his brow. That last reflection of his had seemed to come from without, as though someone else were making it. . . .

Arabella and Turley were bickering. Christopher turned back to Jacintha.

“ I think you have seen enough of our regime to realise that, inquiry or no, my half-brother and sisters will not allow me to walk off with a million,” he said bitterly.

“ Oh, dear,” whined Arabella. “ As if——”

“ Oh, stop it, Araby ! ” shouted Turley.

Miriam raised her voice in a vain attempt to beat down the wrangle, and again, while Christopher stood and loathed them all, Jacintha disciplined them by a gesture.

“ Quiet, please ! Allow Christopher to make known his decision.”

He found himself instinctively appealing to her.

"I am to claim a fortune which I may have obtained by murder?" he asked.

"The mind that is conscious of right laughs at the lies of rumour," she quoted, with faint irony.

Christopher winced. Nonsense, of course! The kind of half-logical moral nonsense Gregory Blenkiron used for flicking irresolute fools the way he wanted them to go. Yet as with Blenkiron, so with his granddaughter—behind the nonsense lay the solid power of compulsion. He was being driven . . . it was detestable. . . .

"Very well," he muttered, "I will not demand an inquiry. I will accept the inheritance, and we will share it."

He looked from one face to another. Turley smirked. Arabella stopped snivelling and her eyes gleamed. Miriam curled her lip at Jacintha and gathered herself for a last blow.

"Oh, I see!" she sniggered. "One-fifth of the fortune unquestioned is better than a million tainted with fear! That's how it goes, isn't it?"

Christopher dimly sensed what was coming—that something more than a crisis had been reached—sensed that a spell had been broken. Jacintha was on her feet clear of Blenkiron's chair, her hand on her hip, looking suddenly and completely Spanish.

"You poor angry fool!" Her eyes were caverns of blazing darkness. "Can you not understand that I hated my grandfather and that I—I do not benefit at the hand, living or dead, of those whom I hate? I leave the carcass of the lion to the jackals."

She swung away from them all and made for the door. There was that about her as she passed Christopher that invited him to follow her.

They walked together in silence the length of the room. He respected her for her courage, for the shoulders that could wear the mantle of her grandfather. But the friendliness he had felt for her had been pierced by the infinite justice of her insult. Jackals! A wonderful word of exquisite righteousness. He felt no resentment. Under the sting of a merited insult it would be easier to accept his share of the million.

They were alone in the hall. She lifted her passionate gaze to his.

"It was not I who killed Gregory Blenkiron," she said, with a vehemence that shook her, "but my confession that I would have done it if I could have placed you in a terrible position. I honour you and thank you with every fibre of my being for your chivalry. Good-bye."

She was gone. Chivalry! He hadn't thought about it like that. He had thought only that she was driving him by the danger of her self-chosen position. So, in a sense, she was. But still—she was a wonderful woman. Chivalry! A strange glow suffused him as he returned to that monstrous reception-room and Turley and Miriam and Arabella.

"Has anyone any objection to Miss Blenkiron's plan?" he asked. "We say nothing, and as soon as the property is made over I hand you one quarter each? . . . All right. We'll leave it to Stanton."

He turned on his heel and left the room, resolving that after the funeral he would never see any of them again.

CHAPTER IX

ORDEAL BY DOUBT

“WELL, that’s that, then,” said Turley, and sighed with profound relief.

The three were still at the writing-table in the great reception-room, though it was fully ten minutes since Jacintha and Christopher had left them there. Nothing had been said.

“You have been extremely unkind, Miriam, to that poor child, Jacintha,” sniffed Arabella.

Miriam, still very white and shaken, stared ; then burst into hysterical laughter.

“You’re great, Araby. I think she murdered Uncle Gregory. Like you, I have my opinion and I hold to it. I think she did it, you think I did it, Turley thinks——”

“Now look here,” interrupted Turley, with unusual restraint, “for your own sakes you’ve got to stop this kind of thing. If you don’t, it’ll do you both in. Skeletons in cupboards, you know, and so on. Think what you like, but don’t jaw about it. And admit you were a bit out about Jacintha wanting the money, Miriam. Apparently she won’t touch a penny.”

“She wants *something*, I’m positive,” said Miriam obstinately. Then suddenly she sprang up. “You’re right, Turley, we’re going mad already ! Here am I thinking and puzzling when I could be buying ! *Buying !*”

“What, your mourning, d’you mean ?” asked Turley, taken aback.

“Oh yes, if you like ! And good things to eat and pictures and a new house and—and—everything Stephen wants——” She broke off. Tears were streaming down her face. Arabella glared at her but held her peace. Turley cleared his throat.

“Have to wait a bit, y’know,” he pointed out.

"Christopher won't change his mind? He said a quarter to each!" she panted.

"Oh, that'll be all right. Christopher's word is his bond. Only probate takes time, y'know, even when everything's shipshape. Look here, how would you like a hundred or so to be going on with? You can have that now——"

"With our dead unburied," complained Arabella, "it really seems blasphemous to——"

"Oh, get out, Araby!" shouted Turley, in a sudden fury. "Get *out*, d'ye hear?"

She scuttled away without a word and Turley, muttering to himself, took out his cheque-book and began to fill in a cheque. Miriam watched his shoulders. Her mind had slipped back again.

"You think Arabella did it, don't you, Turley? Why?" Apparently Turley's mind had slipped back, too.

"Why? Well, I don't know that—and I've got absolutely no case, mind you. But it was quite true what Uncle Gregory said about her hating Prade."

"Was it? I thought she'd forgotten him. I'd no idea. Stephen's in love with Prade's daughter. They met at an Art School. Odd coincidence, isn't it?"

Turley blotted the cheque.

"Damned odd! Shouldn't encourage it, if I were you. Make things very awkward. . . . You can endorse this now, Miriam. . . . I tell you, Arabella loathes Prade. Twice—this is in confidence, mind you—she's tried to upset his apple-cart. If she tries again with a quarter of a million I'm sorry for him, though there's no doubt he spoilt her life for her. Bit thick, after seven years."

"But I hear he married for love—he's devoted to his wife still. Her money and position and so on simply didn't count. So Stephen says. He sees them often."

"That don't do Arabella any good," grinned Turley. "She's a bit mad, y'know. But of course I've no case against her as regards—last night. None at all. . . . Look here, let's drop it. You go shopping—it'll pull you together. I've got an appointment in the City, if you'll excuse me."

Miriam took the cheque, thanked Turley in the aggressive way that had become second nature with her, and watched him leave the room. She wondered what he would do with

his quarter. Somehow she simply could not get on with her own plan of campaign.

Was Turley right? Had Arabella done it? Miriam tried to remember Rowland Prade, Arabella's lover of so many, many years ago. Arabella had been twenty-two—rather pretty; delicate, very shy. The engagement had gone on and on. Seven years. Heavens, what a time! And Uncle Gregory wouldn't help them because his sister's second marriage had so angered him. Seven years . . . and then Prade had rescued the Earl of Callister's daughter from drowning, and loved her and married her. Hard on Arabella, twenty-nine by then, a little faded, a little soured.

And then, quite soon afterwards, Charles Cordant had died, and Humphrey had been disinherited for marrying that ill-fated Spanish girl, and things had changed.

Miriam looked round her. She remembered so well coming to this house to live, with her mother and the others. She had been twenty-seven then, Turley twenty-three, Christopher a schoolboy of ten. At first the ease of it all had been heaven. Then her mother had died, and life had sunk into a groove. Uncle Gregory provided comfort, but so little freedom. They went nowhere, saw nobody worth knowing. And she was nearly thirty. . . .

So that marriage with the drawing-master seemed romantic; a glorious adventure. . . .

Miriam's thoughts wandered on. She folded the cheque absently. Desmond Barnaby. She would never fear him again. He could do nothing, ever again, to her and Stephen. And he shouldn't sponge on them, either. Perhaps they'd go abroad. How much a year was a quarter of a million? Stephen could marry anyone now. He'd much better not get mixed up with the Prades. No knowing what Arabella might attempt, if Turley had been right in his facts.

Had Arabella killed Uncle Gregory? Or Turley himself? No, no, it was Jacintha. . . .

A clock chimed the hour.

Miriam leapt up, her mind racing. It was midday and she sat mooning there! There was the cheque to cash and Stephen to see; she must, *must* get back her self-control.

She tore out of the room and upstairs to pack her few belongings. She, who had dallied so, was mad now to get away.

In fifteen minutes she was out of the house.

"Let's see, now," she muttered to herself, "which 'bus——? Oh, my brain *is* going! I could have had Uncle Gregory's car!"

She hailed a taxi, drove to Turley's bank and cashed the cheque. Then back to Stephen's place of business—a third-rate photographer's where he did "touching-up" and kept the books. She told the taxi-driver to wait while she went in and asked for Mr. Barnaby.

She still had the illusion of humouring Stephen when she asked for "*Mr. Barnaby.*"

Stephen came at once, stooping a little, though he was only twenty-two. He was very shabby—shabbier than he need have been, Miriam had to admit—and he looked unhappy and bored.

"Hullo!" he said uncomfortably. "Is anything up?"

Miriam was regaining her poise.

"No. As I was in the City I thought perhaps you would like to lunch with me."

"Rather!" He glanced at the clock ruefully. "But I say, it's not yet half-past, you know. Would you mind waiting just a few minutes—one or two things I must finish off or there'll be a rumpus. Could you wait in the Lyons' three doors up?"

"All right," said Miriam. She wished he weren't so shabby. Stephen had never been willing to make the best of things. He said he tried to—and Miriam told herself that of course he did try to—but he wasn't good at it. Christopher said—but then Christopher had always been hard on Stephen in some ways, though kind. Where should she take Stephen to lunch?

She must be careful. There was only a hundred pounds so far. And the rest might be hung up for a week or two—it might be hung up for ever. But there was the hundred pounds anyway.

Stephen was standing before her, taking off his hat. Her mind jumped backwards to the time when she had first begun to hate Uncle Gregory. "Take off your hat like a little gentleman. . . . *There's* a clever boy!" She smiled at him.

"I'm not in the mood for marble-topped tables to-day, Stephen. I've got a taxi. Tell him the Trocadero."

"Something *is* up," said Stephen, as the taxi began to

wriggle down Cheapside. "Have you backed a winner?" He had brightened eagerly. He looked more youthful now, his smile hiding the weakness of his mouth.

"Babble," ordered Miriam, and closed her eyes. "I like it. Talk nonsense about the ledgers and troubles you nearly got into."

"You're a bit of a dear old muddlehead, aren't you?" returned Stephen. "I've told you more than once that I have nothing to do with ledgers. I doubt whether I've ever seen one, and I'm quite sure I don't want to."

"Sorry I'm so stupid! They're all one to me, really. Do you like your work, Steve?"

"Like it? *Like* it? Good Lord! Haven't I told you every evening for two years how I detest it?"

"Yes, you have," said Miriam, with an irritation that was new to her when Stephen was in question. Then she rallied. His work *was* detestable. It tired him so, prevented him doing anything better in his spare time. Oh, what did it matter? It was over—over—over!

"Get a noisy table," she said, when they arrived at the Trocadero. "Near the orchestra—and where people keep bumping your chair."

Stephen, at a nod from her, ordered lunch. The waiter deposited the wine list. She waited until the waiter's back was turned and then picked up the wine list. She knew nothing about wines so chose the most expensive.

"Order a bottle of two-seventy-six, please," she said. Stephen looked at two-seventy-six and then at his mother. She was looking away. Stephen gave the order.

Stephen was bewildered and therefore uncomfortable. He began to talk, telling her about the troubles he had nearly got into. The orchestra drowned his voice, but he went on talking. Miriam thought that he was extremely interesting-looking and told herself that more than one woman in the room was eyeing him. She sipped the champagne diffidently, then boldly. It was the first time they had ever drunk champagne together. It was the first time she had sat with him in anything that could honourably be called a restaurant. There were sweets in motherhood she had never tasted—deliciously trivial sweets—sitting in a restaurant and having women look at him and wanting to tell them that he was her son and that he didn't know they were looking at him. She was feeling the tiniest bit dizzy.

"Do you think we could have another bottle?" she asked.

"No," said Stephen firmly. "Look here, old thing, it's frightfully sporting of you to give me a blow-out—but there are heaps of other things we need, aren't there? You've had a stroke of luck with a dealer, I suppose. Is it 'Exmoor'? Topping bit of work that, with the heather and all that!"

"But you asked me not to sell that, ever," she reminded him quickly. "You said you liked it too much."

"Oh yes—so I did," said Stephen vaguely. "It isn't 'Exmoor,' then. What is it? Cough it up!"

"You're very coarse, Stephen," said Miriam. "If you don't order liqueurs and a cigar, I shall myself, and they'll think I want to smoke it—the cigar, I mean, and we shall be turned out."

"I shan't have time for a cigar, thanks," said Stephen moodily. "We'll have the liqueurs and chance it. We'd better have black coffee, though. That'll steady you up a bit if the liqueurs start tickling."

He wouldn't have time to smoke a cigar in her company because he would have to go back and do work he detested for another man. What a fool she had been to think she would tell him nothing about Uncle Gregory until the quarter of a million was absolutely safe!

"If you don't have a cigar you'll quite spoil my little treat," she said.

"Two benedictines and a Corona," said Stephen to the waiter. "My blood be upon your head, mater! Old Smart's very down on lunches—and he'll know I've been lunching."

That did it.

"He pays you four-pounds-ten-shillings a week for letting him be down on lunches," said Miriam slowly. "Presently I will give you four-pounds-ten to send to him instead of giving him notice."

She saw Stephen glance at her empty glass.

"Uncle Gregory is dead," she said slowly. "He died last night. I benefit very considerably under his will. In a week or so, as I understand it, I shall step into about a quarter of a million." She drew a deep breath and gripped the sides of her chair. "In the meantime I have drawn a small advance. It will be sufficient for our needs until the other comes along."

"A quarter of a million!" repeated Stephen. He picked up his cigar, put it down again, then lit it.

Miriam watched him intently. She was just honest enough with herself to know that in many ways Stephen had grown up a disappointment. The Blenkiron tenacity in her sought for a strength of purpose in him that was not always present. Stephen took too much for granted, and then again hung back, dawdling where he could have pushed on. And he was self-engrossed even in his love.

"How much is that a year?" he asked unsteadily. And then, before she could speak: "Old Prade'll find me worth cultivating now, won't he?"

Miriam stirred her coffee. This was not the time or place to speak of the undesirability of the Prades from a Blenkiron point of view. She felt tired again, and—flat.

"A quarter of a million!" Stephen was saying again. "Lord, if only Uncle Gregory had given you a hint that he was going to divide up the money between the four of you! We needn't have slaved then."

"Why not?" asked Miriam blankly.

"Well—people would have seen us through, wouldn't they?—if they'd known we could pay it back in the end. But you always seemed to take it for granted that he didn't like you and wouldn't do anything for you. Why, you hadn't seen him for about five years until he sent for you yesterday! Odd he should die so soon after! When was it—in the night?"

"Yes. No, in the early morning. It was—heart failure I believe. Don't let's go into all that; your Aunt Araby will supply you with all that kind of information if you want it." She checked herself; her tone was too sharp. After all, he was excited and excitement made one futile. She noticed that his hand was unsteady. He was running on, unconscious of her mood.

"I shan't have to turn up at the funeral, shall I? I'd rather be getting on with the spending department. A quarter of a——"

"I shall make it all over to you," interrupted Miriam, with deliberation. "If you don't want to go on with your painting you can take your proper place in the City and hand me an income. I shan't want very much. But I expect you to do great things with it—turn it into a million. You will be, in effect, the steward of my money."

"Oh . . . yes. Of course!" said Stephen. "I don't know about turning it into a million, but I ought to be able to do something with it." He was naïvely surprised, and the *naïveté* warmed her heart to him again. When all was said, he was only twenty-two. She smiled at him and, on one of his sudden impulses to please, he seized her hand and patted it.

"There's not another mother on earth who'd behave like this!" he exclaimed. "I know I'm a bit of an ass and haven't hustled half as much as I might have—and yet you're dropping your fortune in my lap."

Miriam gripped his hand and said nothing. This was the first moment of happiness that wealth had brought. She drew a deep breath. Oh, to stretch it, stretch it! Further . . . further . . . spanning life. . . .

Stephen withdrew his hand.

"D'you mind if I hop off and tell Aline?" he asked.

"No," said Miriam dully. Then she recollected herself. "That is to say, won't it keep? I'd planned to take you shopping. You must get decent clothes now; you'll be going about a bit, meeting people. Meeting other girls, too." She smiled with forced gaiety, and was aware of his frown.

"I don't want to meet other girls particularly. You seem to have forgotten that Aline and I are engaged—er, practically. This money'll clinch it. The shopping can wait a couple of hours, can't it?"

"I suppose so. Pay the bill, Stephen; here's my purse. By the way, don't say anything about—about Uncle Gregory's will. Just say that your mother benefits financially by his death."

"Oh, right-o!" said Stephen vaguely. "Waiter!"

Miriam hesitated.

"I don't know whether I ever told you that Sir Rowland Prade knew my mother and—all of us—years ago?" she began carefully. There was no response. Stephen had called for a telephone directory and was turning the leaves.

Almost violently Miriam got up and left him.

CHAPTER X

ALINE PRADE

WHILE Stephen talked to his mother of Aline Prade, the girl herself, a couple of miles away in one of Kensington's prettiest Queen Anne houses, was sitting with her parents in the room they called the boudoir. Though, as Lady Margaret Prade was wont to remark—"With Rowland's pipes on every table and Aline's sketches on every chair, where I am supposed to *boulder* I really don't know!"

She was a tiny woman—Lady Margaret—frail as a flower-petal and as fragrant. Her hair that had been golden was now flecked with white, which gave it a curiously luminous appearance. From under quizzically-arched brows her eyes looked out with as blue a gaze as ever upon a world that had always been good to her—possibly she had never taken its goodness for granted. "I've been so happy that I'm quite sure great sorrow will come to me one day," she had confided once to her daughter. "But you aren't afraid of the idea of it," Aline had returned quickly, "so if it comes, it won't be worse than just a cessation of happiness for a while. And you can afford to live on your memories for a bit, Little 'Un." Which was characteristic of Aline, who looked on life as a store-house with welcoming, open doors.

She was taller than her mother, though only of medium height. All that was gallant and enduring about Lady Margaret was there in Aline, but vividly, as though a veil had been drawn aside. Perhaps the keynote of her was simplicity. The child of a perfect marriage, claiming comradeship instead of tolerance from those who had reared her, she lived life joyously and directly. She brought her friends to her home to share its bounty. She was beautiful with the distinctive beauty of bright golden hair and eyes

like brown gilly-flowers and the supple grace of two-and-twenty years ; she was conscious of her beauty but untrammelled by it. Imaginative, but unafraid.

At the moment she was cutting the leaves of a book and studying her father thoughtfully.

"Daddy, do you feel inclined to give a thousand pounds to a good cause ? "

Sir Rowland, lounging with a certain grace in an arm chair, started out of his lethargy, then began to relapse. A gastric peculiarity made him invariably lethargic after lunch, while for the rest of the day he was confusedly energetic. He was a small man, dapper, with lazy eyes that liked to twinkle. He had an odd air of having been a wicked and crafty man without ever having done anyone any harm.

"All causes are good, my dear. Nature of things ! And a thousand's a lot of money these days. Is it a hospital ? "

"No. It's the Scarfield Institute."

"What ! Dogs or something ? "

"The Scarfield Institute of Medical Research," elucidated Lady Margaret softly. Behind her Dresden-china manner she was intensely up-to-date.

"Phyllis Loman's studying there," pursued Aline, "and she took me to one of Christopher Cordant's lectures the other day."

"Cordant. H'm ! " said Sir Rowland, pulling at his cigar.

"I've told you about him before, Daddy. He's related to Stephen Barnaby. He's quite young—Mr. Cordant, I mean—but he's made one or two discoveries, and he asked the Institute for a high-power electrical installation, but they refused it him because it would cost about a thousand pounds and they hadn't got it."

"Research ? " echoed Sir Rowland. "Not vivisection, I suppose ? "

"Dear, do try to get dogs out of your head ! " said Lady Margaret. "It's nothing to do with vivisection. I'm not quite sure of the exact nature of the work, but I've heard that Mr. Cordant is a very good lecturer." She looked at her husband with some meaning in her gaze that eluded his daughter.

Sir Rowland pricked his ears. He possessed the literal physical power of pricking his ears. They would twitch and become slightly pointed.

"Have you met him, Aline?"

"No. Stephen wanted me to once, but I don't think I should care to. He's so handsome that I'm sure he must be fearfully conceited. But there's no doubt about his work, Daddy—oh, bother!"

The telephone rang. She picked up the receiver and recognised the voice of Stephen Barnaby.

"Stephen, it's too bad of you. I was just wheedling some money out of the fond parents."

"Not a bit sorry," came the answer. "Aline, I've simply great news. May I come along and tell you?"

"Oh, of course you can! I'm so glad. Isn't it lovely when lovely things happen? What kind of thing is this?"

"Well, I can't tell you over the wire—it's sort of semi-confidential in a way, don't you know. But I'll jump in a taxi right away. Good-bye."

Aline hung up the receiver and beamed upon her parents.

"Stephen will be here in a few minutes," she said. "He's got good news—perhaps he's done something really good and someone's bought it. By the way, he can tell you all about Mr. Cordant's work. They're friends."

"H'm! I'm going back to the City," said Sir Rowland, getting himself out of his chair. "A thousand pounds, eh! Are you really set on it, Aline?"

"I don't want it if you or the Little 'Un have any real feeling against it," said Aline. "Only—it always seems to me so dreadfully stupid when a man wants to do good work and can't because someone else wants a new car."

"H'm! Socialism!" said Sir Rowland. "I'm a capitalist"—the slow eyes twinkled—"thanks very largely to your mother. I've a keen sense of the rights of property—that's why I've never regarded our money as being wholly mine. I'll write you a cheque. . . . You can send it on to the scientist johnny—give him the tip to keep our name out of it if there's likely to be any trouble with guinea-pigs. One never knows. One might stand for Parliament and one can't be too careful. The public don't like research, you know. Gives 'em the creeps. . . . I've crossed it. I say—Stephen Barnaby."

"How your mind does jump, Daddy! What about Stephen?"

"Your mother and I don't believe in parental interference. Victorian era! I can never remember whether

you and he are engaged or not. Your mother thinks not."

"I think—not yet," amended Lady Margaret, smiling at Aline. The girl met the smile, flashing it back with perfect confidence.

"He wants to marry me, certainly; and I would like to marry him—I think. No, that isn't quite it. As he is now, Stephen simply doesn't count. As he could be—*will* be—when he's worked and worked and worked, anybody would be proud to marry him."

"Ah! Funny way girls talk nowadays! I suppose you feel the same about it underneath as we do, but you talk less and say more. He's drawing about two hundred a year now, isn't he? He's a clerk or something. They call them accountants nowadays. Very misleading!"

"He isn't anything as dignified even as a clerk yet, Daddy."

"How you do love labels, Rowland! And though they're often right they're always tied on in the wrong places. The very least important thing about him to Aline is that he is a clerk. He is a clerk to-day—no one knows what he may be to-morrow." Lady Margaret raised her quizzical brows a fraction higher, but she still smiled.

"He's a very pleasant young man, said Sir Rowland. "He might be able to hold down a good job, but I doubt whether he'd ever trouble to butt his way up to it. If you're really keen—I might be able to fit him in somewhere."

"Dear old Daddy, but that isn't the idea at all." Aline was eloquently eager. "I admire Stephen for his—potentialities. If you were to fit him in somewhere, you would destroy the only part of him that really matters. I—I might like him just as much, but—it would be different."

"Can't say I've got the hang of it myself," said Sir Rowland. "I gather you want us to keep off the grass. Good enough!" He twinkled at his wife, and she put out a hand and caught his. Aline slipped away.

"She wants to make this youth into a thoroughly good husband for some other girl, as far as I can see," commented Sir Rowland humorously.

"But she doesn't know it," supplemented Lady Margaret. "That creative instinct—it's so young, isn't it? Of course it won't last! It's all of a piece with patching up stray

dogs and working at the Settlement and painting between it all! Rowland——”

“Dearest?”

“It’s a little bit awkward that Stephen Barnaby should be connected with the Blenkins, isn’t it? We haven’t spoken of this before, but it’s been in our minds, hasn’t it?”

“Well—hardly. He’s Miriam Cave’s son, isn’t he? I never saw much of her—a restless creature, I remember, and a *poseuse*. She couldn’t endure poverty, and then when old Gregory practically adopted them all she couldn’t stand comfort either, and made a most unsound marriage. It’s certainly odd that her son and Aline should have met. Hardly worth worrying about, though. After all——”

“I saw Miss Arabella Cave once,” said Lady Margaret irrelevantly. “Very thin and sharp; the traditional old maid. I felt so sorry for her, Rowland. I had to tell myself that she would deserve my sympathy much more if she had married you.”

“Well, I’m——”

“In the circumstances, I mean, dear.” Lady Margaret was prettily confused. “To marry a man who loves someone else must be one long torture.”

“She was quite ready to embark on it,” said Sir Rowland grimly. He stared into the heart of the log-fire. “Meg, it’s an odd thing, but I believe she still hates me for insisting on breaking that engagement.”

“Yes.”

“What! Why should *you* think so?”

“I don’t know why, dear, but I feel it. I know some things only through feeling them. That, I suppose, is why I don’t altogether enjoy the possibility of Aline marrying her nephew.”

“I can’t prove it, but I’ve twice had a suspicion that she’s tried to jigger my affairs,” went on Sir Rowland, in a burst of confidence. “Through her brother—Turley Cave—rotter, that chap, but he wouldn’t bother to try for my scalp on his own account.” Sir Rowland shook himself. “Ah, well, it makes no odds! It’d take a good quarter of a million to dislodge me now.”

“And we can’t expect Aline to be swayed one way or the other by an old quarrel. Still—if an opportunity occurs—don’t you think you might tell her about it?”

"Confess I married you for your money?" teased Sir Rowland. "I can see the child's eyes! Well, we'll see, Little 'Un. We'll see . . . I must hurry off——"

Upstairs, in the big, light room that was Aline's studio—littered with books and canvases and hyacinths in pots and sleepy, fluffy Persian kittens, Aline was giving an excited greeting to Stephen. He took her hand and kissed it on the palm.

"Have you got the afternoon off?" she asked.

"I've got my whole life off," he answered impressively.

He cleared a space on a lounge-chair and dropped into it. Then, recollecting himself, scrambled up again. "Where are you going to sit?"

Aline held out the cigarettes.

"On the floor. I generally do. Your whole life off, Stephen?"

"Hang on to the fender as hard as you can and I'll blow-off steam. Gregory Blenkiron—mother's uncle—is dead, and she's come into pots of money and I'm to have the handling of it. She doesn't know a bond from a summons for furious driving, and she's going to leave her entire capital in my hands. Of course it's a trust. I shall insist on it being so. I shall regard myself as her steward—nothing more."

"But——" said Aline.

She looked at him. His face was flushed. There was the faint aroma of good wine. He looked very sure of himself, very successful. And Aline, who loved all limping things, was not at home with success.

"Aline, you see what it means for me?" He was gripping her hand a little more tightly than she liked. "When will you marry me?"

She answered the question with another.

"You aren't going to give up painting?"

"No—no! But I'm not going to rush things. I shall take a jolly good look round before I start hard work. After all, I shall only be doing it for the good of my soul, shan't I? I shan't have to work for bread and butter."

Aline's hand slid back to her lap. Her eyes had widened in an almost childish disillusionment. She looked at the glowing tip of her cigarette and was silent.

Stephen sensed a personal reproof where there was only painful realisation.

"I can see what's in your mind, Aline. I'm taking too much for granted. But we are engaged, aren't we?"

She was silent.

"I ought to have gone slow and waited for you to give me a lead. I always make a mug of that sort of thing. Aline, dearest, I always feel most frightfully humble when I'm with you, but somehow when I try to say so it generally ends in swank. I—I want to go down on my knees and kiss your slippers, but I'd look such an awful ass you'd be sure to laugh and—you are going to marry me, aren't you?"

The appeal of his smile brought the kindness back to her young lips.

"I'm not so sure, Stephen; anyway, not just yet."

"But—but, Aline, there's nothing to wait for, *now*."

"Ten minutes before you came in, my father was offering to work you into a well-paid job," she said slowly. "I knew nothing of this windfall of yours, but I refused."

"You refused? Oh! But——"

She could see that he was genuinely puzzled. It was with a pang that she realised how far he had to travel before she could give him her love. As yet he had not even understood the nature of her compact with him.

"Your mother is going to make you rich, Stephen," she began gently, "and you are going to work 'only' for the good of your soul. When you and I planned the big things you'd do, we didn't think about riches and souls. It was just—the big thing for its own sake and nothing else. The vision of it always with us until we got there, and *then* we'd be able to know ourselves in the light of it——" She faltered. For the first time with him she felt self-conscious, as though he were a stranger.

"You've never been hard up. Money means nothing to you and you can't judge of its value to other people," said Stephen, with a certain amount of shrewdness. "I suppose having proper food and clothes and freedom to do as you like means nothing to you as such."

"Oh, I've been a pig!" cried Aline, in contrition. "Dear Stephen, I do—indeed I do—congratulate you on your good luck. And your mother! You'll be able to plan such happiness for her."

He leant forward eagerly.

"It isn't good luck if you keep me waiting until——"

"Until what, Stephen?"

Stephen laughed uneasily.

"Until I've convinced the world of my genius, I suppose; though I must say I should have thought——"

Aline put out her cigarette.

"You don't understand, Stephen. First you think I was waiting for money. Then you remember I've always had plenty, and could have got you plenty, and so you think it must be fame you've got to reach. We've talked about things so often, it's strange to think we've been at cross-purposes all the time." She linked her hands round her knees, her eyes dewy, her breath coming quickly. "Don't you see that I was not thinking of myself—or us—but of what you call the good of your soul. Oh, it's an old-fashioned phrase, but that's what I meant! The splendid beginnings in you, Stephen; they've got to fulfil themselves; in reality, not only in dreams. Until they have I can't say what I feel for you; you don't exist for me——" She stopped, brought up by the sound of her words. She hadn't intended to put it as harshly as that.

"You don't love me," said Stephen shortly.

"I could love you," amended Aline steadily. "In a way, I do love you now for what you're going to be. I believe in you so, Stephen. Don't let me down by not——"

"Making good! That's what it comes to."

She was silent. His tone was ironical, made her feel a conceited little prig, setting her standard ridiculously high. Aline frowned at the tips of her shoes. If that were true she was as mistaken as the lady who threw her glove into the arena full of lions for her lover to snatch away.

Reason reasserted itself. She was not setting Stephen a capricious task with herself as the prize. She was trying to make him from what he was into what he so well might be. For the good of his soul—yes, just that! Souls were such vibrant, beckoning mysteries. . . .

She looked up at him again. She could not always gauge his moods. He was staring at the fire. She wondered if he were annoyed.

"Yes. I see what you mean," he said slowly. "I suppose I did think that making good meant giving you furs and things; and of course you've got tons of furs already. By George, you're right, you know, Aline! I

never asked myself before why you looked at me. I was quite humble enough to wonder, you know, but I never worked it out. I believe now that you sort of promised to care for me—on trust."

"I think I did, Stephen," said Aline, radiant again because he understood. "And all the trust is still there."

He rose.

"Well, anyway, I've got a quarter of a million to help pull it off," he remarked, a note of cheerfulness penetrating a deep sigh. "Do you mind if I clear out now? You've given me a bit to think about, you know. I'd better go back to the City and clear up decently and give 'em proper notice. I—may I write?"

"Oh, please!"

He made no move to approach her and she knew that it were better not to hinder his going. She still felt radiant. Oh, he would be splendid once he was determined! And of course it must be heaven to have enough money for your wants after years of grind.

Her train of thought led her back to the cheque her father had given her. She went to her desk and endorsed it; then wrote her own cheque for the same amount to the Scarfield Institute.

"I'd better send it to Mr. Cordant," she mused, "and explain that it's for the particular purpose."

She paused, pen in air. If Stephen's mother had inherited money at old Mr. Blenkiron's death, very probably Mr. Cordant had, too. Possibly he wouldn't need her contribution now. Then another aspect of the case dawned on her.

"You're prepared to let him carry all the expenses simply because he can afford it!" she reviled herself energetically. "No doubt you won't hesitate to benefit by the results of his research, you selfish worm, you!"

She took a sheet of notepaper and wrote: "C. Cordant, Esq., Dear Sir."—then tore it up and began again with: "C. Cordant, Esq., Sir."

"I must make it carefully impersonal," she told herself. "You never know with those awfully handsome men."

CHAPTER XI

THE MILLION AND—SAFETY

BY midday Christopher alone was left in the house in Grosvenor Square. Turley was still in the City. Arabella had murmured something about a mourning order. Markham, the solicitor, called, and Christopher received him in the secretary's room.

"Very sad news, but of course we had to expect it at any time!" said Markham.

"Yes," said Christopher.

"It's hardly a time to offer a man congratulations."

"Oh, thanks," said Christopher. It would not do, he knew, to leave it at that. He must play the game.

"It's the merest chance that it happened to be myself," he continued. "It might as easily have been any of the others. I know for a fact that there were wills made similarly in favour of each of the others excluding me. That's why I rang you up."

"Common enough in such cases!" said Markham. "Morphia plays the very devil. Many a man has lost a fortune through neglecting to pass the salt at the right moment. You say there were wills in favour of each of the others? Is there going to be—any question of a dispute?"

"None whatever," answered Christopher. "We've had the indelicacy to discuss it already this morning, the whole four of us. We have agreed that I am to remain the official heir. By the way, will you act for me?"

"Certainly. It'll be a simple enough matter. He used to think a good deal about his death and his estate. He had a separate account at the bank for the death duties. By the time they're paid the estate will be worth roughly a million. If there's no dispute, it'll be a mere formality. You'll probably be in possession in about a fortnight."

"As you've consented to act for me," said Christopher, "will you please draw three up deeds of gift or whatever they're called—I mean documents by which my half-brother and sisters can enter into possession of equal parts of the estate? I intend to divide it into quarters and share with them equally."

Markham pursed his lips and cocked his head on one side.

"I don't—*quite*—like that," he said mincingly. "The probate officials might boggle at it."

"But surely——"

"Give me those instructions when I have obtained probate," said Markham. "I came here this morning to see about one or two quite small things," he hurried on. "You would doubtless prefer to go through the papers with me?"

"To the best of my belief they're all in that desk," said Christopher. "I'll leave you to it."

So much for Markham! Christopher loafed in the hall, and wished Jacintha had not gone away. He had told Markham the truth, but had thereby given him a totally false view of the situation. That was what he had contracted to do. He had contracted to give Markham, and everybody else who might be entitled to one, a lying explanation.

He had no puritanical objection to a lie as such. Scientifically, he regarded a lie as a stupid blind-alley—morally, if he thought about it at all, it came in the category of stuffy rooms and an insufficient change of clothing. Added was a special bitterness in the reflection that Gregory Blenkiron had already made him lie—had coerced him by the old method. In this nightmare inheritance of his, to take the course that common decency demanded would be to victimise Jacintha. And Jacintha had thanked him for his chivalry.

After lunch Dr. Stanton came again. In some way he had heard that Christopher was the heir and addressed him with a certain formality.

"The—ah—funeral arrangements!" said Dr. Stanton.

"Yes, of course!" said Christopher. He had forgotten all about the funeral. "On the many occasions on which my uncle talked about his death, he always expressed a desire to be cremated."

"Quite!" said Dr. Stanton. "I imagine he made

provision in his will to that effect. I am required to obtain another signature to the certificate—but that will be in this case a mere formality. The—ah—arrangements can be made by telephone. It is quite a simple matter, I assure you.”

“Thanks. Do I have to refer the cremation people to you?”

“Quite unnecessary—though they know my name quite well. One could mention it *en passant*,” answered Stanton.

He cleared his throat and fumbled.

“The—ah—certificate—the—ah—death certificate!”

Christopher took the certificate. The “safe conduct” to Gregory Blenkiron’s million! Stanton, the fumbling mediocrity, had signed away Jacintha’s danger and had made the four of them rich. And there had been no hue and cry, even as Blenkiron had promised. And the body would be cremated and no one would ever know—no one ever could know.

“If you will be good enough to notify me as to the time?” Stanton was saying, “I would like to be present. The least one can do. . . . The passing of a great personality! One felt a dwarf in his presence. It passes, and one feels that somehow there will be an indelible impression in the ah—sands of Time.”

“Yes,” said Christopher. “I’ll ring you up.”

“Thank you,” said Stanton. “The—ah—least one can do.”

Christopher saw Stanton out. On the way back to the secretary’s room the death certificate creaked in his breast pocket. He would have to show it to the cremation people, and they and Stanton between them would destroy the possibility of ever discovering the truth.

It was a moral certainty that Gregory Blenkiron had died naturally—it was a scientific probability that he had been murdered.

Any one of the four of them, or more than one of the four of them, might have dropped the hyoscine tablet into the glass. One of them might so easily have returned to the room before dawn, and, frightened and bungling, have left that particular will by accident. Or, as Jacintha had pointed out, left it there deliberately.

Scientifically speaking it was a miracle that Gregory Blenkiron should die just then by chance, and by a further

combination of blind coincidences have left one of the wills intact. A miracle!

"I have never seen a miracle, but I have often known men to lie." The half-remembered formula of doubt slid into his brain and for the moment shocked him.

Logically it was impossible to assure himself that neither Araby, Turley nor Miriam had committed murder. It did not matter very much, he supposed. The degree of moral guilt in killing Gregory Blenkiron must be very low. Still, there it was. The doubt must be there for ever. For himself it was of little importance. He could bar it from his mind. But ten years hence, would Arabella still be wondering whether Miriam——

"I must ring up the crematorium," Christopher said aloud; but the crematorium official refused to break his train of thought. The arrangements were too simple.

A single resolution had formed itself. He had consented to a conspiracy of silence, and the conspiracy must be observed with the utmost particularity. The doubt must remain for ever a doubt. There must be no piecing of indirect evidence that would throw a darker shadow upon one than upon another. He rang the bell.

"Marpleton, the undertakers will be here shortly with the shell. The funeral will take place to-morrow at eleven. As soon as—the funeral—has started, I want you to have the room thoroughly cleaned and made tidy."

"Very good, sir."

He would give the others, and take himself, the benefit of doubt—if indeed benefit could be derived from doubt. They should be entitled to doubt him too if they wished. In a firing party, he supposed, the man who knew after firing that his rifle had been loaded with blank would have the moral decency not to proclaim the fact.

Jacintha did not think that he had done it. Again, did it matter? Thought of Jacintha was pregnant with vague anomalies. She had tossed aside a fortune—a mere *geste*, perhaps. Still, it was impossible not to concern oneself with her future.

He would have to do something about Jacintha.

CHAPTER XII

"THE THROAT BENEATH THE HEEL"

JACINTHA had left her grandfather's house without ceremony. Her inner being was descending from the emotional peak from which she had spoken of her mother, and defeated Miriam Barnaby, and thanked Christopher for his chivalry.

At the corner of Grosvenor Square she stopped a taxi.

"Thirteen Corbold Street, off the Edgware Road," she ordered crisply, and got in.

She was now once more the quiet, somewhat mechanical individual who had served Gregory Blenkinsop with deadly patience and tireless hate. She pondered, frowning, sitting very still. She seemed to weigh and reflect and reject and approve.

The taxi stopped. She paid the driver and put her latch-key to the door. The house was let out in unfurnished apartments. Jacintha went up to her own, on the third floor.

She moved slowly, leaning upon the stair-rail, her shoulders sagging with exhaustion. Only the sombre flames in her eyes showed that her vitality had not completely ebbed away.

"Ah, Mees!"

The door on the third floor had opened. A small, heavy old woman stood aside to let her pass in.

"I have returned, Pinar."

The woman locked the door and took the hat and coat Jacintha tossed her, putting both away with leisurely care.

The room was very bare as to floor and walls, but unexpectedly rich in colour. The couch upon which Jacintha had flung herself was draped in red and yellow. In the window a vivid blue parrot shifted sullenly on its perch.

"Pinar," called Jacintha.

The old woman left her task and came towards the couch. Jacintha lifted her eyes and for a long moment they stared at each other. Then—

“There are blood-feuds in England also, Pinar,” said Jacintha. Her voice had a harsh quality that Christopher Cordant would not have recognised.

Pinar’s face showed a flicker of bewilderment.

“The señorita has often said that the English laugh at the vendetta and call the avenger an assassin,” she returned in voluble Spanish. “That is why the señorita in this country is at war with herself. To break her oath she must seem to herself in part a perjurer; then, when the sun grows warm, she would slay herself.”

Jacintha’s eyes raked the woman’s face.

“Nevertheless it is true, Pinar, that here in England also men may hate enough to kill, though perhaps they do not most hate the man they kill. . . . There are four who had reason, as I had reason, to kill Gregory Blenkiron, Pinar. They had only to put a tablet, or two, into his glass at night, and they could achieve their end.

“Gregory Blenkiron is dead, Pinar.”

The woman’s sallow face twitched convulsively.

“Then—the blood-feud has not been kept?”

“Has it not, Pinar?”

Again they gazed at each other. The parrot gave a shriek of laughter.

Pinar’s lips moved, muttering the fragment of a prayer.

“Oh,” moaned Jacintha, “I am so tired, mamita, I am so terribly tired! Get me to eat and drink, and then we will speak of the death of this man we planned to kill!”

Instantly Pinar was active. She hurried to a dark and narrow cupboard called the kitchen because it held a gas-ring and a sink. Presently she brought coffee and sandwiches and fruit. Then she ran for a rest-gown, and brushes, and a phial of faintly-scented perfume. She coaxed Jacintha to undress, and then, while the girl ate, she drove back fatigue from the supple form with massage, brushed and scented the long hair, fanned and soothed and crooned a tuneless, wordless chant.

Jacintha’s lashes drooped. She was not asleep, though. Pinar might be allowed to think so. Jacintha wanted to think and she wanted to think chiefly about herself.

Ever since she could think at all, Jacintha had thought of

herself, sometimes to the exclusion of everybody else, sometimes indirectly, as a sounding-board for the melodies of her life. As a child she had contemplated her isolation ; as a girl, in America, she had watched herself develop and pondered on her goal. Then had come the revelation of her mother's fate, and she had absorbed herself in the effects of that tragedy upon her mind. Actor, audience, and art-patron in one, she never wearied of the play.

More than once she had been accused of insincerity. It was not true. She was not insincere ; opportunist, perhaps. She had not been playing a part when she had attended meticulously to Gregory Blenkiron's correspondence ; or when she had sneered at his dismissal of her ; or when she had clung shaking to the door of the breakfast-room and faced the shattering fact that her victim had laughed last. In all these levels of emotion she had been herself, but a different facet of herself. Her opportunism lay only in that she knew instinctively which facet to present. She chose her representation of herself to suit herself, not others. She chose surely, with an end in view. . . .

She opened her eyes now, and smiled dreamily.

“ Your flower cannot yet tell you all that passed, mamita. She is still too tired. Tell me—wisdom.”

“ Wisdom ? ” echoed Pinar, brushing magnetically. “ What wisdom has Pinar ? ”

“ Oh, much ! much ! To put the throat beneath the heel of him who would go upon an ill-chosen way, Pinar—that was great wisdom. Tell me more, and you shall have a silk dress and a gold ring.”

“ When the señorita marries her kinsman ? That will be a feast ! Will it be soon ? ”

“ Soon,” whispered Jacintha. “ Oh, very soon.”

“ Always the throat beneath the heel, my flower, and the world is yours.”

CHAPTER XIII

BEFORE THE FUNERAL

ON the following morning an urgent message by post took Christopher Cordant to the laboratories. Bromhead, his junior, was in a technical difficulty. Christopher extricated him, explained why he would probably not be working for a few days, and then, as there was time to spare, attended to his official mail. It was after ten before he came to Aline Prade's letter.

"C. CORDANT, Esq.

"SIR,—I beg you to accept the enclosed cheque for £1,000 on behalf of the Scarfield Institute for the express purpose of installing a high-power electrical plant in the laboratories over which you preside.

"I am,

"Yours truly,

"ALINE PRADE."

Christopher fingered the cheque and laughed. In the laugh was irony and a good deal of bitterness. If the gift had come two days earlier it would have tripped Gregory Blenkiron—it would have spoilt one of his perorations—"We're getting the plant, thanks, Uncle Gregory." Then would have come anticlimax—Miriam would have giggled, the spell would have been broken and—Gregory Blenkiron, might still have been alive. . . .

Odd that some outsider should have heard of the wrangle over the installation! He looked again at the signature and repeated the name aloud. He had heard it before somewhere—then he remembered. Stephen Barnaby had told him, with a good deal of circumlocution that he was, as it were, engaged to a girl whose father was wealthy but an awfully good sort. Aline, that was the name—he had thought Stephen said "Aileen" and explanations had

ensued. He remembered, her father was Sir Rowland Prade. Prade. The man who jilted Arabella had been a Prade. Hardly likely it was the same, though!

But why the thousand pounds? Stephen could hardly have canvassed his fiancée for the sake of his friend.

A thought jumped into his mind.

"I wonder if it was that girl in front?"

A slender girl with sunshiny hair and quick, wide eyes and an air of being breathlessly and insistently alive. He had noticed her because she was so unaffectedly interested in his lecture; she gave him an undivided attention that was a compliment in itself. He had had her flitting in and out of his memory a good deal since then, now that he came to think of it.

If that was Aline Prade, Stephen was favoured of the gods.

Christopher fingered the cheque. It was a bit of a dilemma—a bit of a nuisance. A quarter of a million was presumably to be his in the course of a week or so. He could not in common decency let some generous layman supply him with an electric plant. He would return the cheque.

But the cheque was made out to the Scarfield Institute. It was highly questionable whether he had authority to return it. He must write a civil letter, explain as much of the circumstances as was necessary, and suggest the withdrawal of the gift. He glanced at the clock. He would do it after the funeral.

.

It was later than he had bargained for by the time he arrived in Grosvenor Square. A motor-hearse was waiting and the front door was open. Turley loomed out of the hall.

"Oh, here you are!" he said, with a grin. "The girls were beginning to get nervy." Christopher's eyes travelled in the direction of "the girls."

Arabella was standing by the hearth, a heavy crape-bordered veil flung back from her face and falling down behind, almost to her ankles. Christopher thought she looked ridiculous. His eye passed to Miriam, seated in a big chair, dipping into an illustrated paper, that none

might accuse her of hypocritical grief. Christopher started. How handsome she had grown since he saw her last ! Could clothes really do so much ? She was elegant, composed, beautifully groomed. She was distinguished where before she had only been conspicuous.

She nodded to Christopher.

"Everything is ready I understand," she said, "but as it isn't eleven yet, Arabella won't let us get on."

"What does that matter ? There's no earthly sense in waiting," said Christopher. A man, who seemed to be a kind of foreman, detached himself from the funeral party. Christopher told him to proceed and he and his assistants went up the stairs.

"Is Jacintha here ?" asked Christopher.

"No," said Turley. "I take it she's not coming. Blood-feud and all that, you know—hardly decent !"

Arabella began to cry. Miriam yawned. "Merry party !" said Turley, and sniggered. Christopher resolved that he would avoid Turley after it was all over. He would avoid Arabella, too. And he was not very sure that he even wished to see Miriam again. They would all be rich and he could drop them without their being any the worse off for it.

Christopher was standing by the dining-room door. Arabella and Miriam came and stood by him. Turley stood a little apart.

Arabella took Christopher's arm.

"They'll be here in a minute. I always feel——"

Christopher did not hear what she always felt and knew that no answer was required of him. He was conscious of a growing sense of irritation. With cremation he had hoped to escape the pageantry of death. But here it was. Hushed whispers, a snivelling woman, those outrageous mutes—how Gregory Blenkiron would have chuckled !

"They are coming !" whispered Arabella.

The foreman appeared at the head of the staircase and behind him could be seen the two first bearers. Christopher looked away.

"My *hat* !" came from Turley. Simultaneously came a stifled scream from Arabella, and from Miriam a contemptuous : "*S-plendid* !"

Christopher jerked round. The four bearers were beginning the descent. At the foot of the stairs, her hand

upon the massive rail, was Jacintha—Jacintha more incredibly Spanish than Carmen herself, in flaming shawl and red-heeled shoes and striped skirt. Jacintha, waxen white, with a splash of crimson that was her mouth and the glittering blackness that was her eyes.

As the bearers, with practised caution, began to move down the staircase, she stepped forward and began the ascent.

Christopher, who had instinctively sprung forward to drag her from the staircase, checked himself and watched. He heard Miriam's drawl—

"She ought to have a rose in her mouth. The theatrical costumier she hired that thing from has let her down. Oh, what a fool!"

"It's sacrilege—poor Uncle Gregory——"

"Beastly melodramatic!" growled Turley.

The bearers had almost reached the small, square landing that formed the bend of the staircase. So had Jacintha. The men hesitated. She went arrogantly on. It looked now as though she were going to blunder deliberately into the coffin. No, her bare arm flashed out.

"Stand back," she said.

She was obeyed. The dumbfounded bearers huddled back against the wall. The coffin tilted and swayed, the pall was lifted ignominiously aside. Hand on hip she sauntered across the landing and up and away, as though her foot had kicked the dead out of her path. . . .

"Oh, damnation!" breathed Christopher.

Though he did not know it, he was the only one of the party who was genuinely outraged. An insult to a corpse as such was meaningless to him. The manner of the insult at once angered and humiliated him. In that gross and tawdry masquerade he saw the spiritual suicide of a woman whose honour and dignity he had championed.

His one immediate concern was to rob the incident of any direct result. Arabella was a doubtful factor. He gripped her and made her follow the bearers, who had by now reached the front door. With indecent haste he got her into the limousine. He stood on the pavement waiting for Turley and Miriam. He looked around for any other car and saw with relief that there was none. He intended to prevent Jacintha, by physical force if necessary, from accompanying them to the crematorium.

He looked back into the hall. Jacintha had disappeared. Then he entered the car.

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Christopher's indignant resentment against Jacintha had not waned by the time the four of them were again sitting in the car on their way back to the house. Unconsciously perhaps it was fanned by each successive change in the atmosphere of the funeral party. It was Arabella's hour of triumph. She was the only one of them who had attended a funeral before and she had attended many. By tacit consent she became mistress of the ceremonies. It was she who signified when normal conversation might be resumed.

"I am so glad he was cremated. It was his dearest wish, although I always felt——"

"Everybody does it nowadays!" said Turley. "The old boy was very modern in some things."

"It's a very good thing for us that he was modern in this respect anyway," said Miriam, and hummed a tune and looked out of the window.

Miriam was a fool, thought Christopher. Her train of thought was very patent. The cremation of Gregory Blenkiron's body made Dr. Stanton's certificate for ever unshakable. As it was now impossible to prove that he had been murdered, it was obviously impossible to prove that anyone had murdered him. Proof had been destroyed—doubt had been established. Miriam could not see that. She was jubilant because she knew that the police could never touch her—could never even compel her to confess how very nearly she committed a murder—if indeed she were innocent.

Because Gregory Blenkiron had been cremated, Miriam could not see that Gregory Blenkiron was with them at that moment and would be with the four of them to the end of their days. For himself, Christopher was no more afraid of Gregory Blenkiron dead than Gregory Blenkiron living—and no less. Fear was hardly the word. He felt as he had felt before, not fear, but caution.

"How I shall ever be able to bring myself to face that awful girl again——" Arabella was saying.

"Don't," said Miriam. "You'll hurt Christopher's feelings."

It was the kind of taunting remark with which Miriam used to bully him when he was little. She was reminding him that in championing Jacintha he had made a fool of himself. He knew she was right and his anger welled afresh against Jacintha.

"I suppose you are all agreed that we must compel Jacintha to accept a share of the property!" he threw at them, savagely determined that he would be the one to do the compelling.

There was no answer. Miriam stopped humming but she still looked out of the window. Arabella looked sullen; Turley non-committal.

The party arrived at the house and scattered.

Turley went into the dining-room. Christopher chose the secretary's office.

Jacintha was sitting at the table, writing.

CHAPTER XIV

"A DANCER OF NO REPUTE"

CHRISTOPHER was startled. He had taken it for granted that she had left the house. He stared at her for a moment and became aware that she was in the rich, dark dress she had worn on the day after Gregory's death.

She looked up at him and down again at her work.

"I have a lot of odds and ends to clear up," she remarked.

It was the cool, even voice of the girl who had helped him with his monograph—whose breeding and integrity he would have vouched for until that morning. The return to what he regarded as her normal self only deepened his resentment.

"Why bother?" he demanded coldly.

"One has one's conscience as a secretary," she replied.

Christopher felt that he was being put off. She was luring him back to the normal plane, and the sooner he showed her that it was impossible to resume their former relationship the better.

"I notice you have changed your dress for the purpose," he remarked.

Her eyes gleamed, and she caught her lower lip between her teeth to steady it.

"Have I not bought the right to express my feelings towards my grandfather?" she asked him.

"No. Neither I nor anyone else has sold you the right to insult Gregory Blenkiron."

She pressed her hands wearily to her eyes.

"Don't let's quarrel over a phrase," she begged. "I thought you understood. It doesn't matter."

"A phrase!" he echoed. "If we're quarrelling at all, Jacintha, we're quarrelling over your behaviour this morning."

"And you are demanding an explanation?"

"No," snapped Christopher. "I am giving one. You said just now that you thought I understood—meaning, presumably, your attitude to your grandfather. I thought I did, too. I wish to explain now that I did not. The incident of this morning put our relationship on an entirely different footing. As I am at least your grandfather's nominal heir I have a very clear responsibility for you as regards the division of his property."

She dropped her hands. She seemed surprised.

"Oh, but that has all been settled! Any share you might think I'm entitled to—I resigned it the other morning."

"I don't hold you to that resignation," said Christopher, and added: "In fact, I ask you to withdraw it."

She stared at him, weighing his meaning.

"You thought, then, that the other morning I was just—posing?"

Christopher made a gesture of impatience.

"Good God, no! I thought you refused a share in the fortune because, as you most justly remarked, we were behaving like a pack of jackals and *you* remembered that you were a lady of a great house. I thought that your dignity as a lady of a great house made it pretty well impossible for you to behave otherwise. And when I saw you *posing* this morning on that staircase, Jacintha, I laughed, not at you but at myself—I laughed at my lady of a great house conspiring with a theatrical costumier to outrage the feelings of the more timid of the jackals—to make a ghoulish grimace at the husk of a strong man. I had thought you—magnificent; I thought you, this morning, what you looked, a——"

"*A Spanish dancer of no repute.*"

"What!" gasped Christopher.

Though she had almost cried the words at him, he failed to grasp their full significance until she let him see the agony in her eyes and in her clutching, claspings hands.

"That dress—it belonged to the proprietor of a cabaret, Christopher, twenty years ago; but it belongs to me now. My mother used to dance in it, for money, after—after—you understand—— It is part of the life in the cabaret—the dance. They made her dance, Christopher—my mother——"

The pleading hands were in his. The lithe form twisted and collapsed. He felt her face against his hands and heard her terrible, tearless sobs.

Christopher was appalled. He saw that he had understood nothing of her talk of the blood-feud, that he had regarded it as a mere emotional eccentricity. Now it was as if a curtain had been drawn aside, revealing a living, vital hatred that compelled both reverence and horror.

She was crying naturally now. That was more tolerable than that dry, groaning sob. He was able to feel the man's embarrassed panic when a woman cries. Miriam must not see her like that. He lifted her back into her chair, strode to the door and locked it.

He himself was excited—tingling with a purpose—to meet this devil of hereditary wrong and slay it in clean combat. He touched her bowed head. How silken soft was her hair. . . .

"Jacintha—Jacintha—Jacintha. I want to speak to you. . . . I'll wait a minute."

There was a pause in which he gathered strength. He was confident that strength alone was required, the moral strength to hurt that he might heal and bring the light of reason into the dark corners of her soul.

"You are listening, Jacintha? . . . All that I said about your behaviour this morning is true. I will only add to it now that if I had been in your position I might have performed some similar act—no, that is not wholly sincere—I do not think that I would have, but I will say that I think that nine ordinarily decent men and women out of ten might have been unable to restrain themselves. You have been made to carry a burden that is far too heavy for a woman's shoulders. It has been too heavy for yours."

"Yes. I know. It has crushed me."

"No, it has not crushed you. For one thing, it is at an end. You will tear this horror out of your imagination."

She was recapturing her self-control.

"And in its place?" she challenged.

"In its place!" he echoed, faintly disconcerted. "You have your whole life before you."

"To live out—on *his* money?"

Christopher did not answer. To heal with Blenkiron's money the wounds she believed to have been caused by

Blenkiron would be futile. Here was a solid material obstacle he had not bargained for. She was talking connectedly now, with urgency and force.

"You say my hatred of him has not crushed me. Can't you see what it has been to me all these years? It has been my companion, my solace, my religion—I've lived for it. By an accident I failed to fulfil its trust. Now I have nothing—absolutely nothing."

"You have a dozen things which many a woman would envy," cried Christopher. "You have beauty, education and—yes—balance."

"My education is of little use outside a drawing-room. No one would employ me as a secretary except perhaps another elderly, retired man with no real business. My will has been sapped. There is not enough left of me to make an effort."

"Don't!" he said sharply. "That is the gospel of despair!"

"And why not?" She turned upon him fiercely. "The world has welcomed you—given you useful work to do—and you cannot understand the utter uselessness of a woman like me—you cannot understand my—unwantedness. Since my mother died I have had a devoted servant—but I have had no friends, until the other day when you sacrificed your principles to save me from being accused of murder."

Christopher scowled. He was conscious that in some way her reasoning was wrong. But he was listening to her too acutely to be able to remind himself that with the cremation of Gregory Blenkiron he was no longer the champion of her safety.

"And to-day," she continued. "You take the trouble to try to understand my tragedy. You understand so much. There is the little more that you cannot understand—that my tragedy has already proved too much for me." Again the lengthening pause.

"What are you going to *do*, Jacintha?"

"Nothing violent—or picturesque," replied Jacintha. She was completely herself again. "But I—I shall want your help."

"Yes, yes, anything I can do," he said eagerly.

"I shall want your help—as a scientist," said Jacintha. "I have never taken any kind of drugs. I don't know anything about drugs. I want something that will make

me forget myself—something that will just help me to fade away in full possession of my faculties. I—don't want it to make me beastly before the end comes."

"Jacintha! I thought you were serious——"

"You say that—but you know that I am serious."

He was aghast. He held the dark, brooding gaze with his own, trying to fathom it, sensing somewhere an unworthiness, baffled, forced to accept her weakness with her strength.

"It's all so plain to me," she said, just above her breath. "When my father married, my grandfather desired to crush—and he has crushed all three of us—my father, my mother, and now myself."

Christopher winced. It seemed to him an uncanny interpretation of his own thoughts. He saw Gregory Blenkiron again as a destroyer. He had pinched and starved the souls of Arabella, Turley, and Miriam, and had left them the legacy of a doubt that would be too strong for their moral fibre. He himself alone had made anything of a fight against Blenkiron when alive—he would go on fighting Blenkiron as ruthlessly now that he was dead.

"Crushed—no!" he almost shouted. "You say you're at the end of your powers; I say you're only at the beginning. Jacintha, I always stood up to him. I'm going on fighting him. And you must fight him—with me."

"With you?" There was a quivering hope in her voice that drove him forward.

"Why not?" he demanded. "Gregory Blenkiron has made you feel that you're unwanted. Let me make you feel that you're wanted. There is usefulness for you and me together. My work has a social side that embarrasses me; now you are most eminently fitted to take it over. As for that money of his—the whole of it shall go into equipment, and I will support you on my earnings as a professor. Yes, yes, there's work for us, Jacintha, together."

"And happiness?"

She was near him. Her eyelids were drooping. Her body was very close. Happiness? It seemed an odd question in the circumstances. He wondered whether she were going to faint. He touched her shoulders to steady her. Her arms crept over his.

"And happiness?" she whispered.

In the hall outside the gong sounded. Happiness? Her arms were still resting on his, and in them were the qualities of hesitation of incipient flight, of—promise. . . .

Happiness? He knew the happiness of work, the passion of the chase for the elusive truth. Her arms were slipping backwards and he stayed them. . . . There came the faint fragrance of her—the visions of heroic work faded into the half-forgotten dreamland of early manhood.

"And happiness!" he muttered, and caught her strongly to him. . . .

He released her at last, regarding her with a sense of wonder and a little humiliation, as she turned away to smooth her hair. Happiness? As good a name as any for a sweet delirium that would not spoil his work.

Hang the delirium! That was a trifle to them both. They would be friends. She would carry out the domestic and social part of the programme with efficiency and enjoyment, and she would forget the cabaret at Seville and Gregory Blenkiron.

He took her hand and patted it.

"We'll do it as soon as possible, won't we?"

"Yes. As soon as you like."

He looked into her eyes, then tore his gaze away.

"Let's get busy," he said. "It'll be fun telling the others. I think you'd better give them a little time to get over it."

He unlocked and opened the door as he spoke. Miriam faced him.

"Lunch?" she said. Her eyes wandered from him to Jacintha.

"I—we——" said Christopher. He wished Miriam could have kept out of the way. She was smiling oddly at Jacintha.

"Oh, I *see*!" she said softly. "I was positive you wanted *something*!"

Christopher started, but Jacintha was unperturbed. With a shrug of the shoulders Jacintha passed him and crossed the hall to the dining-room.

"Miriam," said Christopher, with ominous calm, "Jacintha is the only one of us who has clean hands as regards Uncle Gregory's money."

"Yes," said Miriam laconically. She followed Jacintha.

Christopher took out a cigarette and lit it. As he put the case back in his pocket his hand touched an envelope. He drew it out and stared at it, and then reopened it.

It was Aline Prade's letter and cheque for a thousand pounds.

CHAPTER XV

ROMANCE

“**D**ADDY, they don’t want our cheque.”
Sir Rowland Prade started and blinked.
“Who don’t? What cheque? What’s the matter with it?”

“The cheque you gave me three days ago for a thousand pounds for the Scarfield Institute,” explained Aline. “There’s nothing the matter with it, as a cheque, but Mr. Cordant has sent it back.”

“Oh, yes, I remember!” Sir Rowland put down his paper. “Anti-vivisection!”

“Near enough, dear,” laughed Lady Margaret. “Why don’t they want it, Aline? Move your chair back a little way, darling; you’re so—dazzling.”

Aline, smiling her young, grave smile, moved back; but the pale winter sunlight followed her. It woke the gold of her hair to such glittering life that she was as if crowned with fire. From under it her eyes looked out, very wide and shining. She turned a little in her chair, the letter in one hand, and her loose sleeve fell back in creamy folds, baring wrist and arm.

“‘Dear Miss Prade,’” she read. “(I called him ‘Sir.’) ‘I am at a loss sufficiently to express my thanks—(see how beautifully he’s dodged splitting the infinitive Little ‘Un!’)—for your generous gift. Your kindness has placed me in a somewhat embarrassing position in that, a few hours before your letter was received, provisional arrangements were made by which the Scarfield Institute is to be very fully equipped. I am compelled, therefore, to suggest, that you withdraw your gift, and at the same time I beg you to accept my assurance that we are no whit the less grateful to you for your generous impulse.’”

“‘As you have been good enough to show this interest

in our work, I may perhaps add that new buildings are projected, particulars of which I will take the liberty of sending you in due course.' "

" I should like to see them very much," said Lady Margaret composedly.

" First time I've ever heard of a philanthropic show returning a cheque ! " muttered Sir Rowland. " Must be something wrong somewhere ! "

" There's that bit about new buildings," said Aline, putting the letter energetically back into the envelope. " I wonder whether he's got an architect."

" And if not," twinkled Sir Rowland, " you know just the man for the job ! A young genius whose work will revolutionise our antiquated conceptions of architecture as soon as he's given a chance to show what he can do."

" Daddy, how ever did you find all that out ? "

Lady Margaret laughed again, and her eyes caressed her husband. He had risen, and was lunging playfully at Aline with his folded paper.

" You offer this chap a cheque for a thousand—which means he's morally bound to take your architect if he possibly can. I know what's in store for that architect. He'll be introduced to a builder who is in low water as the result of inventing a new brick, and as soon as the contract's signed, the builder will want an extra clerk, who in his turn will need a newly-patented typewriter. If you'd gone in for finance instead of philanthropy, or whatever it's called, Aline, you'd have been a trust-magnate."

Aline caught the prodding newspaper and turned it deftly to a weapon of offence. For a happy moment her laughter and the winter sunshine and the gay chintzes and the little leaping flames on the hearth became one in triumph. Then Sir Rowland recaptured his paper and Aline swung back to the table.

" Little 'Un, he's getting to be a real Roly-Poly. He's putting on weight. Why don't you make him run about more. He looks quite baked this morning."

" Aline, *dear* ! But Rowland, you do look—tired. You aren't being worried in the City ? "

" No. Oh no. . . . Oh no ! " Sir Rowland strolled over to the fire.

" That sounds more like ' Yes,' " said Lady Margaret,

pursuing him. "I'm so sorry. It isn't anything serious, is it?"

"Hardly!" said Sir Rowland. "You remember my talking to you about Western Coalfields? Well, they're being rather an active nuisance to us. Can't make them out, nor can anyone else. For the last week or two we've been taking it for granted that it's a bubble. If the bubble bursts, we shall be all right."

"And if it doesn't?"

"My dear, I make it a rule never to talk shop," said Sir Rowland somewhat tardily. He took his wife's hand and held it for a second against his face.

"I've just been wondering——" began Aline from the further window.

"Eh?"

"I've been wondering whether Stephen may not be at the bottom of this sudden prosperity of the Scarfield Institute. I believe—I know—that he wanted to do good with his money."

"Hasn't it occurred to you that Mr. Cordant may have inherited a similar amount of money?" asked Lady Margaret. "Stephen's mother is Mr. Cordant's half sister. If Mr. Blenkiron left his money equally divided, as one would gather from what you told me of your talk with Stephen, Mr. Cordant would have as much as Mrs. Barnaby."

"Yes, I know, Little 'Un. I thought of that. But Mr. Cordant's letter sounds as though someone else had given him what he wanted for his work, doesn't it? He doesn't mention himself, really, all through. . . . Oh, well, I'll go and write you the thousand back, dears, but don't spend it; there are other institutes devoted to research."

They looked after her a little wistfully as she left the room. Aline had no recollection of the days when things were quite often serious in the City for Rowland Prade, in spite of the financial and social help his wife had brought him. As far as her memory reached there had been security and the conscious ease of wealth.

"We won't spend the thousand or give it away," said Lady Margaret. "We'll just go quietly for a bit."

"Yes," said Sir Rowland absently, ". . . yes, go quietly. Nothing to make a song about yet. I should

think it pretty obvious that this fellow Cordant has come in for a share of Blenkiron's money."

Lady Margaret waited. Experience had taught that her husband's irrelevances had a knack of keeping themselves together.

"Turley Cave—Arabella's brother—is a director of Western Coalfields. I don't say for a moment that there's anything personal in it, mind. Can't be . . . And now this thousand has come back, just at the moment when it'll be wise to retrench a bit—Blenkiron's money for a certainty. . . . Aline is going to tackle Cordant about some protégé of hers. Cordant looks safe for a seat in her gallery of gallant young super-men."

Still Lady Margaret waited. Then it came tumbling out.

"Don't you see, Meg, that we're sort of getting entangled with the Blenkiron family again? First Stephen Barnaby. Then this funny business with cheque, and Western Coalfields and Cordant in the offing. They're sort of rising at us, like the wood in that thing of Irving's—Shakespeare's."

Lady Margaret was perturbed.

"Rowland—why have you started thinking so much lately about Miss Arabella?"

"I don't know," he answered, and forced a laugh.

"Utter nonsense, of course, my dearest! I expect I've been concentrating a bit too much on Western Coalfields. Take a short holiday soon."

"Had I better give Aline a hint—that you would rather she didn't approach Mr. Cordant? Or why not request her quite openly——?"

"My dear, you're getting superstitious," said Sir Rowland. "What possible harm can come of her bullying the unfortunate man over an architect? Wonderful vitality! Cool off later on! When she meets the right man, I suppose. I must be off."

"Rowland, if we were to lose every farthing, we would have a splendid time to look back on! And Aline would feel that, too. She isn't spoilt, you know. In a way I believe she'd *like* to be poor. She's so tremendously interested in people who are beginners; the more they have to struggle the more she's with them, if you know what I mean. And the fact that she herself has no material cares is more of a barrier than a comfort."

Sir Rowland looked tenderly into the face turned to his in such soft appeal.

"You and she, Meg, you two are my splendid time. So long as I don't lose you. . . ." His arms went round her and she clung to him. "Lord, it doesn't seem twenty-six years ago, does it? And you've grown lovelier and dearer. . . . Now, look here, Meg, you once told me you didn't like being kissed before midday. You'll use this in evidence against me, I know you will."

"Very likely." Lady Margaret patted her hair into place. Her eyes were wet. "No, I won't worry about anything if you won't. That's fair. Good-bye, dear."

.

For a fortnight, in her very few idle moments, Aline toyed with the supposition that Stephen Barnaby had decided to finance the Scarfield Institute. It would be generous of him; but she hoped he hadn't.

She reconstructed their last meeting. He had understood the difficult thing she had been saying to him and his love—she was sure he had understood. But Stephen wasn't very strong. Aline brooded large-heartedly over that realisation. He might so well leave her with the full intention of going straight to work on something worth while, and then on the way be drawn from his purpose—a little to this side, a little to that—until in the end it would seem as big a thing to give a large slice of his mother's money to the Scarfield Institute as to cut himself off from all the world and wrestle and strive and hope, alone with the beauty that was hidden within him.

At the end of the fortnight he came to see her.

"Oh, Stephen, how jolly! Sit down. Mind this fellow's leg, won't you? It still hurts him rather." She picked up a disagreeable-looking mongrel and found it a cushion on the other side of the fire. Stephen didn't care much for dogs. "Cigarettes, matches—and I'll sit here. Tell me all your doings, Stephen!"

Stephen shifted nervously. He had always wished Aline wouldn't be so interested in "doings." Made a man feel an ass—couldn't say, "Oh, spending money!"—and of course there wasn't time for much else as yet.

He cleared his throat.

"You don't mind my blowing in for a bit? I'm not going to talk about—what I talked about before."

"Dear old Stephen!" Aline lit his cigarette. "I believe you expect me to blush. Let's be crude about it. Last time we were talking about marriage, and we both said all we had to say. If there's any more, I'd love to hear it."

"There isn't," said Stephen.

There was a silence. Aline stroked the mongrel. She couldn't quite make out why Stephen had come. She studied him. He was very well dressed now, much more alive-looking, but——

"A man's a fool to drag a woman into his troubles," said Stephen.

Aline leant forward, tingling. He needed her and every fibre leapt to his service. He had started on the long road to the worth-while thing and he needed her on the way! She was transfixed.

"A man's only a fool to do it if he wants to give her furs instead of friendship, Stephen. Please tell me. It's the work, of course. You've started?"

Again Stephen shifted in the deep chair. He kept his gaze on the fire.

"No. No, as a matter of fact, I haven't started yet because I've had so much to arrange. We're moving, you see—got a topping little place in Chelsea—and you know what a lot of time it takes to get a studio just right." He passed hurriedly into details. "Mother's keen on house-decoration, you see, and she's planning the whole place out in colour schemes. Amber and nasturtium-red and a curious shade of green for the studio. I'm looking forward no end to showing it to you. There's the usual north light, of course, but there's a sort of built-out verandah, looking into the garden, that makes it rather different from most places. I shall do a lot of work there once I get going; it's quiet. Never could make any headway before in a cramped space with trams going by."

"Your mother could." The words slipped out before Aline could stop them. She tried to cover the embarrassment they caused him by a quick: "Ring for tea, will you? And—and tell me, what it is that's worrying you?"

"All right, then! I'm up a gum-tree. About this money of mother's!" Stephen hesitated.

"Go on." It was disappointing that it wasn't about his work. What did the furnishing of a studio matter? Genius could be born in a garret. . . . "Go on, Stephen. Don't you want to tell me after all?"

"I don't want to tell you anything about it, and that's the funny part of it," said Stephen, with his delightful boyishness. "But I've got to tell somebody—and there's simply no one on earth but you."

"What about your friend, Mr. Cordant?"

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Stephen, alarmed. "He's the gum-tree—in a way. Look here, don't let's do it backwards, Aline . . . Since I've been of age I've generally attended to official things at home—duns and things like that. Since my mother knew about—the money—there's been a lot of correspondence. Her brother advanced her some money through the bank, and there've been letters in connection with that that I've attended to. Well, an official-looking letter turned up yesterday morning amongst others, and I opened it—with the others. Nothing wrong in that, surely!"

"Of course not! Well?"

"It was from the solicitor—to my mother, of course—and it said: 'Madam, the deed of gift drawn by our client, Mr. Christopher Cordant, in your favour, by which you are to receive one quarter of the estate of the late Mr. Gregory Blenkiron has now been executed, and if you would kindly call at this office'—well, I needn't go on. What do you think of that?"

"I don't think I quite understand," said Aline slowly. "What worries you about that?"

"When I came along here the other afternoon, full of the great news," said Stephen petulantly, "I told you that my mother had benefited under Blenkiron's will. *She* told me so. She has made several references to it since. If that solicitor's letter means anything at all, it means that she did *not* benefit under his will. It means that Christopher benefited—apparently by the whole lot—and that he's made her a gift of a quarter of it. I tell you, it's just the sort of thing a chap like that would do. One of the best on earth. It's a hundred pounds to a biscuit that he's inherited the lot, and he's dishing out a quarter each to my mother, and my aunt and uncle."

"And you don't want to profit by his generosity! Oh,

Stephen, yes, of course—I see that.” Aline’s eyes were all aglow once more. She had been moralising at him whilst he was up against a fundamental problem! Her mind leapt to a conclusion. “I believe I know how you’ve compromised! You’ve given it all to the Scarfield Institute!”

“Why on earth——”

Stephen broke off. A servant entered with the tea equipage. Aline turned away to give directions.

“Here, thank you, Coniffe. And give Mr. Barnaby that little table—you hate poisoning a cup in mid-air, don’t you, Stephen? So do I?”

She talked nonsense until they were alone again. Then she fell silent. Aline could never shirk things. She did not shirk this difficult moment, in which Stephen must admit that he did not mind profiting by Christopher Cordant’s generosity in the very least.

“To be quite honest, I hadn’t started thinking about the money like that yet,” he said, presently. “I daresay I could find things to give it to, later on. Christopher won’t want it now, though.”

He harked back to his own point of view.

“It’s the Mater that gets me. Why should she keep it a dead secret?”

“That’s her affair, isn’t it?”

“It is and it isn’t! A good fat bit of it is my affair. It’s so odd that she shouldn’t have been open about it. And of course, as you say, I don’t much care to be indebted to Chris.”

“Haven’t you discussed it with her—now that she knows you know?” Aline stirred her tea patiently.

“But she doesn’t,” said Stephen, and added shame-facedly: “I told myself it was her affair when I was gaping at that letter. She hadn’t cared to tell me the truth about it—and I couldn’t very well tax her with it. There was the letter, opened. A situation that wanted a good deal of tact. I fuked it.”

“And said nothing?”

“And took care that nothing should be said,” supplemented Stephen. “I—I stuck the letter up again.”

“Some more tea, Stephen?” Aline’s face was averted.

“That was yesterday morning. She went to the solicitor’s in the afternoon. I thought perhaps when it was

fixed up she'd talk about it. But she didn't talk about it and she—she dishes up some more patter about Uncle Gregory's will. What've you got to say to that ? ”

“ Are you asking me to criticise your mother's action ? ” Aline knew that she sounded an odious prig and didn't care. She felt priggish. Stephen was so strangely *petty* this afternoon. Wealth had changed him—or hadn't it ?

“ I say that she was deliberately trying to throw another handful of dust in my eyes. What would you do—I apologise for the suggestion—but what would you do if you knew your mother had lied to you ? ”

“ I'd spend the rest of my life preventing her and everybody else from finding out that I knew,” said Aline curtly. Then she shook herself together. “ It's a storm in a tea-cup Stephen. There's probably some very trifling and perfectly good reason why she does not wish you to know the full facts.”

“ M'm. I thought of going to Christopher, and not saying anything, mind you, but just hanging about to see if he volunteered anything.”

“ And why didn't you ? ”

“ Can't ! He's on his honeymoon. . . . I say ! There's no reason why he shouldn't go on a honeymoon, is there ? ”

Aline was on her feet. There was a wild force in her—deep in her—rebelling—no, not that—protesting—not even that ; just wondering. . . . No, there was nothing. It was gone. She was standing staring at Stephen.

The flower-scented room was very quiet.

Hadn't there been, then, in reality that great outcry, that clamour ? She felt profoundly bewildered and alone. Stephen was gaping at her ; he looked very plain like that. And he was *much* too well dressed, poor Stephen.

Aline bent and found a log to put on the fire. The mongrel whimpered in his sleep, and she soothed him mechanically.

“ Have you met Chris then, Aline ? ”

“ No—oh no ! That's why I suppose I was so surprised. Somehow I thought of him as solely devoted to his science. And perhaps I thought it was an odd time for a honeymoon—so very soon after a death in his family by which, apparently, he benefited.”

She curled up in her chair again. What on earth had been the matter with her ?

"Who is the lucky girl?"

"Blenkiron's granddaughter—my—his second cousin or something. I can never work these things out. I hadn't a notion, and was fearfully struck when the Mater told me. Perhaps he's been waiting to marry her for years. Apparently as soon as Blenkiron was buried the two of them went to a registrar's office. You can do it in ten days there, and they were married last Thursday. They're coming back this week. The whole thing's beastly indelicate, if you ask me—at least, it would be if it weren't Christopher."

Aline crouched lower in her chair. Fragments of a personality were piecing themselves together around the vividly-remembered young scientist with the absurdly-handsome face and the vibrant, earnest voice. He had inherited a fortune, and he had divided it amongst his brother and sisters, and with his share was going to build new laboratories, and he had suddenly married his second cousin and was coming back after a fortnight's honeymoon to attend to his laboratories.

The room was full of shadows.

"I wouldn't attach too much importance to it all, Stephen. Possibly your mother is only waiting for Mr. Cordant's permission to give you the full facts."

"It's a bit thick when a good woman lies," said Stephen.

Aline flamed at that.

"When a good woman lies, Stephen, it's nearly always a matter of housework. Or children. Or drudgery at the office. When a good woman lies it is because she is too tired to tell the truth—to analyse herself and the person she's lying to, and find out what the exact truth is and then present it so that the other person will sympathise and understand. A lie offers to do all that work for her—and she's too tired to realise that it's a bad bargain."

"In other words, you've got to give them the benefit of the doubt," grunted Stephen.

"No, give them the benefit of a little faith. Oh, Stephen, why do you always make me preach at you?"

"I don't make you, I let you," said Stephen, with a flash of discernment. "Like that beast"—he indicated the mongrel with his foot—"lets you bandage him and pet him. You'd like anyone you could mend, but it mightn't last."

"The mending or the liking?" Aline was intrigued in spite of herself.

"The liking. You mightn't care for a thing you'd mended when there was nothing more you could do. That's why——"

He rose suddenly and came to her chair; gripping the arms he leant over her until his face was close to hers.

"Aline, love me—love me *now*! It'd be so heavenly. I'd make you tremendously happy; I don't mean furs and frocks; I know you take them for granted, but hours like this, and travelling and seeing wonderful things. We could explore—or build. And I swear I'd work, Aline. I could do it if I had you safely, for ever. It's not knowing whether in the end I'll ever get you that makes me unfit to do a stroke. And then, unless I'm with you I doubt whether there's anything in me at all beyond just a facile talent, like mother's. . . ."

Aline drew sharply away from him. She knew suddenly that Stephen was acquisitive. He wanted to make sure of everything and afterwards justify his possession of it, holding fast the while.

"But I *can't* love you as you are now, Stephen. I've told you why. If you had a facile talent, as you say your mother has, and you served it as well as she does, I might love you then—at least, I'd admire you and know what you stood for and—and I could judge of you, couldn't I? But now—you're all obscure, unfinished. Look what Kriel said of your work—Lamente and Horn too—that it had the spark, the promise!"

She faltered. Usually he kindled at words like this. This time he didn't even listen. He looked at her and she shrank from his hunger for her; she did not know him like this.

"First you let poverty keep you back, Stephen—that is, it did keep you back; I understand that. The hard work and the worries and your ill-health, they all deadened your will. But now, I'm so afraid you're going to be tied by money instead. All these colour schemes will drag you. And you see, it's for *yourself* you must make good, isn't it? Not to—to win me, or anything like that, but because you daren't extinguish that spark there is in you. . . ."

"You look so lovely, Aline. Your eyes are like moths'

wings and your hair—I can't think of words that mean your hair, but I want to kiss it." He had bent closer, breathing quickly; an entirely different Stephen.

"Please don't! Sit down again. This isn't fair." She put out a hand to hold him off, but it was useless. He pulled her up into his arms, her face crushed roughly against his shoulder.

"You may hate me for this," he said thickly, "but quite likely there'll never be anything else for me to remember. . . . Supposing I can do all Kriel and Lamente believe—supposing I prove myself as you want me to, you mayn't love me after all. You'd have mended me, made me. How d'you know you'd care for me?"

"I don't know that I would. I always told you I couldn't pledge myself. Let me go, please. I- —"

"That's where I'm wiser than you, Aline. If you won't let me kiss you now, you won't then. Marriage isn't climbing up and up into the heights: it's wanting one another desperately, down in the plains!"

She wrenched herself away.

"No, no, the things in the plains aren't worth wanting desperately! That's just it! Oh, some people want them, I know, but I—I can't. It's climbing I love. It's vision—it's—it's life. The real *you* doesn't live yet, Stephen. And suppose I don't ever love you, what do I matter, anyway? You'll have had the climb, you'll be up in the heights."

There was a long and difficult silence. Stephen stared out into the gathering dusk. Aline watched the firelight. For the first time it seemed to mock her. There was something very cruel about a dancing flame. Then——

"Sorry," said Stephen. "You think I still don't understand; but I do. It's only that I—love. You don't. Well. . . ."

"Stephen, I should like to meet Mr. Cordant. Could it be managed? I hear he's going to build new laboratories, and I want to get him interested in a very special architect I know."

Stephen stiffened.

"Very well, Aline. I will do as you wish."

"Which means that you think I'm in love with the architect. Oh, dear! but I'm not. I'm not in love with anyone."

"And I was ass enough to think you were in love with me a little while ago."

"And you were decent enough to be content when I told you I might be in love with you—a little while hence."

"I know. I'm not grumbling. It's the meantime that gets me. I felt a sort of security before—that if anyone else cropped up you would at least tell me at once."

"But that hasn't changed! I'll tell you if anyone else crops up."

"Promise?"

"Promise. I think I'm rather tired now, Stephen."

"My fault, I suppose. I've never known you tired before. Right-ho! I'll turn up here about three on Friday and take you in the car."

"*The* car? Oh, Stephen!"

"The Mater was keen on it," said Stephen, making for the door. "Saves taxi-fares, you know. Economy, in the long run. Christopher has taken rooms in a little Bloomsbury hotel for the time being, I understand. I suppose you'll bring an armful of your architect's efforts?"

"Of course. I want him to have his chance. Good-bye."

Alone with the dancing flame on the hearth, Aline let the tears come. She did not know why.

CHAPTER XVI

FLAME-FLOWER

IN the sitting-room of a suite on the third floor of the Gulverbury Hotel, Christopher Cordant was at the writing-table, absorbed in a blur of figures.

They were the details of his projected scheme for reconstructing the laboratories. He was working with a balanced clarity that was new to him. Something had happened to him that had calmed his old feverish energy and enabled him to exercise a new economy of mental effort, thereby increasing his powers.

Christopher, in his moments, rare now, of self-examination, presumed that it was love that had happened to him.

It had rather confused him at first. Vaguely, he had always expected love to come one day when he could clear a little space for it in his crowded days. It had not waited for that. A word—a look—and it was there, sprung from nothing, yet strong with the strength of a silken web. He supposed it was like that with Jacintha, too. By tacit consent they never went back in words to the time before Gregory Blenkiron's death; but doubtless emotion had rushed at her and caught her up and swung her into marriage. For some reason he could not analyse, Christopher did not encourage the wonder whether Jacintha had cared for him before they had been thrown together, derelicts of a destructive tide.

He preferred to forget Jacintha, the inscrutable servant of a terrible old man, and Jacintha, the thwarted fury, magnificently leaving the carcase of the lion to the jackals. He dwelt rather upon Jacintha of the last two weeks.

They had gone to Taormina. In that sun-warmed place that hangs like a jewel in air keen as wine, Jacintha's beauty had blazed out in triumphant black and waxen

white and crimson. Christopher let himself drift into a sea of colour and languorous delight. The strange, vivid gowns, of which she had so many, the slow yet insistent grace of her, the withered old Spanish woman who waited on her hand and foot, all wove their spell. The world receded. . . .

Then, violently, it clashed all about them again. The honeymoon was over. Christopher's soul stretched itself, keyed to give and receive as of old. Jacintha was, apparently, not so ready. She was a little plaintive about leaving Sicily at all, although the shortness of their stay had been agreed on from the first. He remembered then that in their brief past he had twice before found himself brought to a standstill by his reluctance to hurt her. That kind of thing didn't seem to happen when dealing with other people. In an indefinite way Christopher linked it up with Jacintha's "foreign-ness"—with the careless, golden language in which she spoke to Pinar, with Pinar herself, sallow, silent, oddly intimate with her mistress, yet more oddly aloof.

Of course, they had to come home at the appointed time. It had been unpleasant, overriding Jacintha in the matter, but there was the work. Christopher had fallen avidly upon his work.

He was deep in it now, on this the second day of their residence in the little Bloomsbury hotel. Jacintha was resting, no doubt with Pinar in attendance. She always rested during the early afternoon. Christopher had no complaint. It was a mutually agreeable practice.

The communicating door opened so softly that he did not hear it.

He started as he felt her arms on his shoulders.

"Love me?"

"Terrifically! I thought I would just go through these figures while you were lying down." He touched her forearm, without looking up at her.

There was a pause while the soft weight of her rested on him.

"I dreamt last night that you didn't love me any longer. It was—desolate."

"It was that shellfish, I expect. I must just——"

The arms had gone from his shoulders as if they had been cut away. Christopher dropped his pencil.

"Oh, well—perhaps I needn't do any more work just now."

"Please go on. I apologise for the intrusion. You must never mind telling me, Christopher, when I interrupt your work with my trivialities."

He pushed back his chair, and twisted round to look into her eyes. They had the curious veiled brightness that he had seen in them before, when one of her moods was merging into another. He called them moods, taking it for granted that beneath them there was something steadfast, enduring.

"Now you're offended. In Sicily I don't seem to have been such a brute, but I've hurt your feelings quite five times since we've been back."

"Please don't reproach yourself——"

"I don't. I'm much too proud that it isn't fifty times. Give me a little time and I'll reduce the average to once a week."

She shot a glance at him from under her lashes.

"If I'd known that you'd be proud of not hurting my feelings more than fifty times a year, I wouldn't have married you."

"Yes, you would. . . . That purpley-blue thing suits you. . . . We would have married if you'd known that I would beat you, and I'd known that you would sulk every day of your life and take to drink or do twenty other beastly things you probably never will do. We married, like every other honest couple, because we had to have each other. Speaking for myself, I consider our marriage a howling success, so far."

"Fifteen days, and thirteen of them in Taormina," said Jacintha. "So that only the two last count."

"And how magnificently we've survived them! You're annoyed with me at the moment, but you don't want to kill me and I'm not even annoyed with you. Think of it, Jacintha. You and I have been pitchforked into an entirely novel relationship, in which our whole life's experience of the proper way for two human beings to treat each other is completely inverted. And we've only had five—differences."

Jacintha drifted across the room, still guarded in glance and gesture.

"I believe you love talking about things when they've gone wrong," she murmured, and tapped a rhythm of her own on the window-pane.

"Have things gone so very wrong?"

"You said that we married because we had to have each other. We did until we came back here. But now—you're not really thinking about me at all; you're thinking about marriage. And a minute ago you were thinking about work. You're not talking about me—you're talking about the idea of me. You didn't talk about ideas at Taormina. You talked about my hair."

"Yes, I know. I talked about your hair and your lips and your arms, like a lover in a novelette, and I shall do it again and again—with the same sickly platitudes that for the moment are eternal truths."

He followed her across the room, smiling down at her.

"Flame-flower, in the years before us, every time the wonder of you creeps over me again I shall discover you to be again divine. I shall give you the worship of my manhood and boast of being tied to the chariot-wheels of your beauty. . . . But you don't want me to be a love-slave for every day of the year. There are the reactions——"

"Times in which you have no use for me."

"The times in which I have the greatest of all use for you, Jacintha. I was afraid of women until I married you."

He stared out into the grey winter afternoon, explaining rather to himself than to her.

"I was afraid of that numbing fascination women are said to possess. I didn't want my will to be paralysed or my purpose diverted. You've taught me that I may be at once your slave and my own master. You've carried me to a moment when I can take in all your loveliness and yet see only the work that civilisation has for me to do—and it's a proud moment, Jacintha. I can feel the soft scent of you and yet long for the mustiness of my laboratories, because I know that as soon as my brain demands rest from realities, I shall fly back to you and romance and forgetfulness. I can leave my whole emotional being slumbering in your shrine, while the rest of me, the part that really matters, can do its energetic mite in the work of the world."

"It wasn't so in Sicily," she put in, very low.

"But, my dear, that was Sicily. Would you have wished it to last? That mood would no more have held in you than in me."

She had seated herself, and, chin cupped in hand, was staring before her.

"Moods," she echoed slowly. "You've spoken of my moods before. I don't think you understand. You have known different aspects of me, certainly, but they are not moods. They are *me*. Myself. I am made of these different personalities. It was no mood that swayed me when I worked day after day for my grandfather. It was a part of me that had come uppermost, a part that still exists, the part that can serve methodically and accurately and impersonally. It came in response to my dominant desire—to satisfy my hate."

Christopher winced and frowned. How she brought back all that sordid business of old Gregory's death! The last three weeks had blurred it for him to a half-forgotten nightmare. Now it was all about him again, burning in her eyes, throbbing in her voice. She was Gregory's granddaughter in every turn of her head, handling herself and him as Gregory might have done.

"Then you changed me, Christopher. You changed my dominant desire from hate to love. I hadn't thought of love till you spoke of it."

"Hadn't you?" He asked it involuntarily, remembering his half-formed fear of having been—pursued.

"What do you mean, Christopher?" she countered, straightening sharply. And, as he hesitated: "Are you suggesting I—I cared for you before you cared for me?"

He knew then that she *had* cared first. It irritated him unreasonably. It was the knowledge that he was unreasonable that drove him to——

"Why on earth shouldn't you? There's nothing wrong in—love—coming to the woman first!"

"Oh, wrong!" She shrugged, her full lips trembling. "It's not a question of right or wrong. It simply suggests that I—I forced myself on you as though you were my only chance of matrimony. And that is absurd. I have had offers before."

"I always took that for granted," returned Christopher, politely. He was trying to piece together, like a puzzle, the impressions she made on him. This sudden narrow pride of sex was difficult to place. Most probably the solution lay in that many-sidedness she herself admitted. The woman who, hate-driven, could work for years in

social obscurity, could also love without humiliation a man emotionally unaware of her; but the woman who had seen her lover at her feet in the Sicilian moonlight could never bring herself to confess that she had been the wooer at first.

"You say love changed you, flame-flower?" he prompted.

"I mean that a new part of me responded to it. You told me in Taormina you had never guessed I could be so——"

"So yielding."

"It was love that made me so. Love can keep me so. Oh, of course I know that you must work, because all men who matter work nowadays; but I thought you would work for my sake, become famous that I might be proud of you, perhaps accept a title so that I should be 'Lady Cordant.' But all that would be in the background, toys for you to play with, as I would play with beautiful clothes and rooms and music. First in our life there would be our love, and so long as we loved you would find me—as you found me in Sicily."

Christopher dug his hands into his pockets.

"It doesn't present itself to me like that," he said, in some dismay. "You see——. You remember that monograph of mine? You read the proofs with the aid of a medical dictionary. To save your life and mine you could not tell me what it was about. Yet that monograph, which dealt with a disease I've never had, was about me. In those few pages was five hard years of me—the only part of me that is of any value to anyone else or myself. And that part of me—we may as well face it—is utterly distinct from what I feel for you."

Jacintha's iris-coloured silks gleamed sullenly as she rose.

"You want to keep love handy, Christopher; a drug to help you rest when you are tired!"

"Don't you too?"

"No! Love to me is the breath of life. It takes all—every hour—every minute—or it takes nothing. Unless you can bring the fruits of your work and your play to lay upon its altar you do not serve your love." Her eyes were pools of mystery.

"Dear child," said Christopher, restlessly, "I'm not built that way. Work for work's sake, not for love's. I

thought you grasped that from the first. Good Lord, if you thought of married life as an absorbed and ecstatic mutual contemplation, with my work as a sideshow when you were choosing a new frock, how on earth did you think we were going to live on six hundred a year?"

She gave him her strange look from under—no, through her lashes, and he realised abruptly that she never had definitely agreed to live upon six hundred a year and give the Blenkiron money to the Scarfield Institute.

"You made no alternative proposition," he pressed, "when I said that I would support you on my earnings and put Uncle Gregory's money into equipment. You seemed satisfied then to work with me by taking over the social side of everything."

"I am ready to do so, Christopher."

"Yes, but—but—it'll be—how shall I put it?—a quite unromantic occupation; as unromantic as my research, on six hundred a year. Dash it all, the kind of existence you seem to be constructing wouldn't be covered by six thousand!"

"I did not realise that your earnings were so little as six hundred."

He experienced sharp disbelief of that. It was a moment or two before he could speak without betraying it.

"I'm most awfully sorry, Jacintha. I don't suppose either of us can change as deep a thing as our attitude towards love. And unfortunately, as it *is* six hundred and not six thousand, you will have to try my way and not I yours. It's rough luck on you, but——"

She walked over to the fire and stooped to warm her hands. Christopher came close to her, a hand outstretched to draw her to him. She raised herself.

"It is not rough luck—it is monstrously and wickedly unfair," she said, and he drew back as though he had been struck. "You promised me on that day after the funeral when I asked you to help me to die, that you would help me to live. You were going to help me by fighting my grandfather, as you said you had always fought him."

"I am not going to break my promise," said Christopher, with rising anger. "I have supplied you with a career as my wife—I'm sorry to put it like that, but that's what it comes to. It's a career that will kill your feeling of uselessness, which, I take it, is what we both mean by fighting

Uncle Gregory. And in the leisure hours we will meet and rest and enjoy our love."

"You are childish," she said coldly. "You give me work to do that any fool could accomplish and think it will absorb me as your research does you. You fight Gregory Blenkiron, Christopher, by throwing a quarter of a million of his money to an altruistic ambition, together with every ounce of your energy and knowledge. And you win. Gregory Blenkiron has been bundled ignominiously out of your mind. Is it any wonder that with such weapons you win? But think of me—me——" She flung her arms wide—"fighting the same power with the little social usefulness of being your wife! Entertaining your friends, saving you domestic worries, making six hundred a year stretch and stretch and stretch—and then, when you are so disposed, being your drug, your slumber. Can't you hear Gregory Blenkiron laughing at the idea of being bludgeoned by straws like that? Can't you see how he'll be with me day and night, grinning at me because I've failed to kill the memory of him as completely as I failed to kill him in the body?"

Christopher stared at her speechless. Nonsense, nonsense, nonsense! The kind of nonsense Gregory would have used, half-logical, half-moral, useful in handling children and fools! Again the feeling of being driven. . . . Christopher writhed under it. He tried to find the flaw in the chain, but Jacintha compelled his attention.

"Where do you think my mind will be while I am dealing with these trivialities that are to be my share? Always with *him*! Always with the hope that he feared me at least a little; always with the knowledge that he is mocking me now as he mocked my mother; always with the doubt as to how he died——"

Christopher wheeled away from her, but her voice followed him across the room.

"Always brooding and weighing, Christopher, as Miriam and Arabella and Turley are brooding and weighing. Always watching and probing till it is the dominant desire to know which desire was dominant when Gregory Blenkiron died. Whether it was Turley or Miriam or Arabella whose soul he bought that night——"

She paused as if to lash her courage, then finished her sentence:

"—which of them killed him."

He looked at her. Her head was flung back, her eyes closed. Behind her, the firelight brought an edge of purple to the dark mass of her hair. Her lips were parted. . . .

There came to Christopher the insane fear that if those eyes opened, it would be the eyes of Gregory Blenkiron he would see ; that if those lips moved, Gregory Blenkiron would speak from the grave. . . .

"We come to the question of money. Sooner or later, I have found, one always does come to the question of money."

The words rang in his ears as though a living voice had uttered them. They hammered at his brain.

Gregory Blenkiron had spoken.

"God !" breathed Christopher.

Slowly Jacintha's eyes opened. He forced himself to meet them. Dark and inscrutable, they hovered for a second upon him and then were withdrawn. She bent again to the fire.

"Forgive me, Christopher. I have been unkind. It shall be as you wish. I will do all I can to help you, and, for the rest, I must take my chance. I quite see that on six hundred a year it cannot be otherwise."

("Sooner or later . . . sooner or later . . . the question of money.")

"I am to understand, Jacintha, that it is my constant and undivided attention only that can help you against this obsession ? "

She huddled down on the hearth.

"Please, Christopher, let us leave it."

"No. You demand, in effect, that we should live on my inheritance, our only real interest being in each other ? "

("Sooner or later . . . sooner or later . . .")

"I have said that I am willing to live your life and take my chance alone."

"Yes, I know you have. You have put your throat under my heel. . . ."

He stopped. Was that a flicker of triumph on her face ? It made him savage.

"On the day of the funeral you told me with scorn that you would not live out your life on his money," he reminded her.

"Nor would I alone," she returned evenly. "Nor

would you. But you use it to fight him with. Why should not I ? ”

He beat down his impatience. It was all such *nonsense*. And below his impatience there was something—a warning—a whisper, perpetually eluding him. . . .

A sound at the door ! Pinar stood on the threshold.

“ The hotel say Mees Prade and Meester Barnabysaire.”

“ Oh ! I’d forgotten——” Christopher tried to collect his thoughts.

“ Show them up ” cut in Jacintha.

An uncomfortable silence and then—

“ Mees Prade.”

And Christopher heard himself say—

“ It is the girl in front.”

CHAPTER XVII

"THE GIRL IN FRONT"

"WHY didn't you give a chap a chance to congratulate you?" Stephen was saying. Christopher said something. There was a burble of greeting, the shifting of chairs, and Christopher realised that Jacintha had "taken" Stephen. Or was it he himself who had deliberately contrived that Aline Prade should sit with him in the bow-window? Anyway, there he was, joining in her laughter, trying to explain away his foolish exclamation at sight of her.

"But I did sit in front," she said happily. "I am honoured"—she made him a quaint little bow—"that you should remember me." She loosened her long fur scarf and a bunch of violets fell to the ground. Christopher retrieved them and quite unconsciously held them while he talked to her.

"I hope you didn't think me a bear for returning the cheque you sent. You see, there was a sudden change of circumstances, and there was really no excuse for hanging on to it. But I was immensely grateful."

"I'm very glad," she said. "There's only one thing better than helping, and that is to find that after all help isn't wanted."

"I'm afraid you won't find it happening very often in this world," he said, with a deep content in her. She was very young, he supposed, by the look of her, but she had the quality of agelessness. She was younger and older than himself, and now and again, for the flicker of an instant, she would seem to be the same age.

"Oh, but I have found it, often. It makes one happy, but there is a price to pay. It always hurts to be told by anything that one is not needed."

"Then I hurt you by returning that cheque?"

"No, because I never imagined that the Scarfield Institute needed me. . . . And it wasn't me, either. I simply asked my father for a cheque, and he gave it. I mean that, if you work at a thing and you find you needn't have worked, it throws you back upon yourself. It leaves you with nothing to do but just be."

"Just being! Isn't that the finest occupation for a woman? I've always thought so. Of course, women can do everything nowadays that we can do. But when a woman works, however feminine she may be in herself, she at least drops her sex while she is working. She discards her first essential. Must the whole race enslave itself? Surely it is for you to teach us to live when we have taught ourselves to work!" He watched for her smile and was rewarded.

"And make a profession of golf and dinners and dances! I'm much too selfish for that, Mr. Cordant—I want them as pleasures. . . . Besides, how could I teach a man anything if I never got to know him? I'm seeing less of you at this moment than I saw of you when I attended your lecture."

"Oh, come!" demurred Christopher. "A lecture is an entirely impersonal thing."

The velvety eyes looked steadfastly into his. He saw the colour come and go in her face. How vibrant, how eager! She was like a clear, high note played on a string as fine as gossamer and as strong as steel.

"But don't you think, then, women should know men in their impersonal moments—when they lose themselves in their purpose? . . . I want to know men when they are striving and hurt and afraid. I want to know them when they strike and when they fall. Wouldn't you want that? After all, what else is there left of a man? His physical being, and, perhaps, his emotional nature—which he has in common with every other man. A mere husk isn't much use to anyone—and I should get so *tired* of the social animal!"

Christopher laughed uncertainly. With a dozen words this ageless child had cut from under him the basis of his conception of woman. He glanced across the room at Jacintha. She was talking to Stephen, it seemed with a certain seriousness. Was that what she had been trying to say to him! He couldn't remember. The room was

full of the scent of violets and the lilting note of this young voice. . . .

Stephen was studying Christopher Cordant's wife. His mother had not mentioned that she was a beauty. His eye took in, delightedly, the ivory skin and midnight hair and eyes. Why had Christopher never even spoken of her before?

"I suppose you'll be taking a house somewhere and settling down, Mrs. Cordant?"

She hesitated.

"Our plans are very chaotic at present," she answered. "It's almost impossible to rent a house in London nowadays, and of course we can't afford to go on living here." She spoke with complete naturalness, but he got the impression that she was watching him obliquely.

"Afford!" he repeated vacantly. "But why on earth—I beg your pardon, Mrs. Cordant."

"Why don't you call me Jacintha?" The deep eyes smiled at him. "If you work it out, we're a sort of second cousins once removed."

"Rather!" said Stephen. "Topping name! I say——" he lowered his voice and faltered into silence.

"Why not say it? What is the trouble?"

"I'm trying not to make a beastly offensive remark," said Stephen, returning her smile.

"You'd find it very difficult to make an offensive remark. Christopher and I are very Bohemian, you know."

"Oh, are you! Good! Then I'll chance it. You said you couldn't *afford* to go on living here. That absolutely knocks me. I thought you could buy the whole hotel if you wanted. Did Chris give away *all* the money?" He pulled himself up, remembering that he had admitted a knowledge about the deed of gift. "I don't know any details," he added hastily, "only that Chris made my mother a present of a quarter of a million. He never said a word to me and I haven't said anything to him either. He would probably snub me if I butted in. I sort of took it for granted that he must have shared out equally, everyone getting a quarter, including himself."

Tea was brought in and Jacintha dispensed it. Stephen

made himself useful in the matter of cups, and resolved to drop the subject of the money, if he could. After all, he didn't quite know yet what he thought about his own position. It would be pretty ghastly to find that honour compelled the polite refusal of a quarter of a million sterling!

Somewhat to his surprise, Christopher's wife resumed the discussion on her own initiative.

"Christopher did share out equally," she said. "Everyone got a quarter, including himself. Are you still puzzled?"

"Well—you can't afford to live here when Chris has a quarter of a million?"

"My dear Stephen, Christopher has, I think, some six hundred a year, made up by the Scarfield Institute and several other similar concerns. The money he has inherited is to be devoted entirely to science."

"By jingo, Chris is splendid!" exclaimed Stephen, jolted into complete spontaneity. "Makes the rest of us feel pretty base kind of rotters."

Jacintha nodded, her eyes upon Christopher's animated face.

"I agree with you, Stephen. He is absolutely splendid. And for myself, I do not mind what sacrifices I make so long as he finds true happiness."

Stephen's attention came back to his hostess.

"Chris is jolly lucky!" he said, looking at her with open admiration. "But, dash it all, it's a bit rough on you in a way. And on me. That car of mine outside, for instance. It ought to be yours."

"Oh, you need feel no qualms on that score," she said, with a precision that made Stephen vaguely uncomfortable. "If your mother were to insist on returning the money, don't imagine that Christopher would touch a penny of it—or allow his wife to do so."

"Why ever not?"

"Some very unpleasant things were said about Christopher. You see, the will was made the day before my grandfather died. And besides that, the circumstances were very peculiar. . . . It was known that my grandfather longed for death as a relief from his sufferings."

"You mean that the others—said things—hinted things?" Stephen stammered, and gave it up.

Jacintha shrugged her shoulders.

"People talk very foolishly under the stress of emotion. But, of course, it doesn't worry Christopher. He found a way of silencing all tongues."

Stephen scowled. He wished vehemently that he had not broached the matter of the Blenkiron fortune.

"You don't mean, do you, that Christopher dished out the money and refused to profit by his own share—out of—out of—pique?"

"I'm afraid, Stephen," came in the low, rich tones, "that I cannot pursue the discussion. It is Christopher's affair, not mine."

Stephen was silent. He was flinching from the first fundamental doubt of his hero.

"Miss Prade would like some more tea," said Christopher.

Stephen's gaze strayed to Aline. She was lovely this afternoon, her hair like spun gold, her eyes shining. She looked perfect in that dress, the colour of bronze under silver. She was getting on well with Chris. Only natural.

Conversation became general. Then Christopher dropped out, twisting the violets in his hand, staring at them absently.

Presently Aline rose.

"I shall be terribly late unless Stephen breaks the speed limit. I have to bath a baby—a delightful midget of a man, full of *joie de vivre*, without the slightest knowledge of what he's been born into. . . . It's hereditary, they say. He's a sermon in himself for any statesman, poor thing. It's no good their trying to fight poverty unless they fight disease at the same time. It's all the same, really. That's why I've been ill-mannered enough to make you talk shop. I hope Mrs. Cordant will forgive me."

"I'm extremely glad," said Jacintha, formally. "I fail him dreadfully. I don't know the first thing about science."

"Nor do I," said Aline.

"But you're coming to see over the labs. to-morrow, nevertheless," said Christopher. "Unless you want to back out?"

"I shall be there at eleven o'clock sharp," said Aline. "Good-bye, Mrs. Cordant. Good-bye."

There was the mild confusion of leave-taking. Chris-

topher went down with them and saw them into the car. He came slowly back to the sitting-room.

Jacintha glanced at him, and then away again.

"Stephen is fortunate," she remarked. Christopher looked inquiring.

"Miss Prade is delightful, isn't she? When are they going to be married?"

"Married? . . . Yes, of course, I forgot. . . . I don't know. I clean forgot all about that engagement. I. . . ."

"Has it not been definitely announced, then?" Jacintha was tapping upon the window again; a rather irritating habit.

"Oh no." Christopher found himself quite eager to explain that no engagement, in the usual sense of the word, existed. "And I shouldn't think she'd be satisfied with Stephen, would you? She's so alive, and Stephen's still very much in the making."

Jacintha tapped on.

"I must do some more work," said Christopher, uncertainly.

The tapping ceased.

"We were interrupted in our discussion, Jacintha, but it seems to me that it all boils down to a question of money. As your grandfather once remarked, 'sooner or later one always comes to the question of money.'"

She made a little shrinking gesture that seemed to him very theatrical. Possibly she was always a little theatrical, but he had not noticed it until now. Why in Heaven's name couldn't she say like any ordinary straightforward girl—"I've changed my mind. I want a share of your inheritance"?

"You feel that I have been selfish in devoting all my quarter of a million to my own purpose," he said. "I suppose I have; I didn't look at it like that before. Now I suggest that I make new plans, put only half my money into the Scarfield Institute, and hand you the other half. You can use it in any non-personal way you like. For instance, you could run a settlement; Miss Prade would help, she's chock full of enthusiasm, and she's a practical worker, too."

"Thank you," said Jacintha, in a stifled voice, "but I do not want money for any purpose unless I can also have you always. All of you."

Christopher was abashed. Her second *grand geste*—and as successful a one as when she left the carcase of the lion to the jackals. Once more, hard on the heels of his admiration, there came a doubt. She denied herself only to thrust more completely her throat beneath his heel.

It came to this: that he must give up his work, his ambitions, and devote himself to the task of keeping her mind free of its ghosts, as she declared that he could. Or he must know that she was going under—and that she would drag others with her.

He became aware that there were violets in the room somewhere, still. Ah, there they were, on the window-seat. They'd keep for a bit, in water . . .

"I am tremendously sorry, my dear, but I can't give you all of myself for all of my life. It's beyond my power."

"I shall be destroyed then," she told him. He could not see her face.

"I—can't say otherwise, Jacintha. The work is the bigger thing."

He made for the door.

"I shall arrange to have half of my inheritance made over to you," he said. She moved sharply, but was silent. A passing curiosity turned him back on the threshold.

"Did you find Stephen interesting? What did you talk to him about?"

"About the peculiar circumstances attending Gregory Blenkiron's death," she answered harshly, and, before he could give more than a startled exclamation, she had gone through the communicating door into the bedroom beyond.

In the bedroom, Pinar was bending over her sewing.

"Mamita!"

"My flower?"

"I am to become rich, mamita. He will give me half of his possessions, for my very own."

Pinar dropped her work.

"The señorita will return to the house of her grandfather! Soon?"

"Very soon, Pinar. Sooner than we planned. And in the room in which he died we will make a feast."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FRUIT AND THE ASHES

“GOES like a bird, doesn’t she?” said Stephen, of the car.

“Yes,” said Aline, absently.

“May I take you on to see the studio?”

“Yes. . . . No, thanks, Stephen. I must get back.”

“Really? I thought you just said that about having to bath a baby because you had got a bit tired of Chris.”

“*Tired* of him? Don’t be silly, Stephen. I could have talked to him for hours more, but I thought Mrs. Cordant was rather out of it. She must be interested in his work, really, but perhaps she thought I was too obviously ignorant to discuss it. Isn’t she beautiful? Like a lovely ivory statue.”

“She’s half Spanish,” volunteered Stephen, and frowned to himself.

He chose the homeward route craftily, making a detour through the Park. Aline was unusually acquiescent. As they neared the bridge over the Serpentine he slackened speed. She loved to gaze down upon the grey beauty of the water in a dusk like this.

“Want to get out?” he suggested.

She roused herself with an effort as he brought the car to a standstill. He had to repeat his question.

“No, I don’t think so, Stephen, thank you. I really must hurry home, and then go on to Mrs. Byker’s baby. Oh——”

“What is it?”

“I forgot to speak to Mr. Cordant about David Marterson, my architect. The man I wanted to help.” She held up a roll of blue-print paper. “I left his plans in the car. I thought I would send down for them if Mr. Cordant was interested. And I—forgot.”

"But I thought that was the whole object of your going to see Chris—to give this chap a lift!" exclaimed Stephen.

"It was," assented Aline. She laughed, and for the first time Stephen heard fear in her laughter. Then, at his surprise, a slow colour crept over her face, burning from brow to throat. He was puzzled.

"It is—yes, it is Stephen," said a voice from the kerb. "My dear Stephen, won't you catch a chill! Really, to sit about in an open car in December——"

"Oh, Lord!" muttered Stephen, and added aloud: "How do, Aunt Araby? Er—may I——?"

Arabella, billowing crape at every turn, came close up to the car and peered at its occupants.

"I was grieved not to see you at the funeral, Stephen. *He* would have wished it. And his death made a difference to you, didn't it? So that——"

"Aunt Araby, may I introduce Miss Prade to you? My aunt, Miss Cave, Aline."

"I am so sorry to hear that you have had a bereavement," said Aline gently. She felt sorry for this vague and angular lady. "I hope——"

"Prade? Are you—what is your father's name?"

The question came with a force that made the girl jump. Under the heavy veil Arabella's eyes glittered as though fires had been lit behind them.

"Miss Prade's father is Sir Rowland Prade," said Stephen, shortly. "I think we must be pushing off, if you'll excuse us, Aunt Araby."

"Do you know him, Miss Cave?" asked Aline, leaning across Stephen. She was astonished and curious.

"I—used to. But I daresay he has forgotten me." Arabella fumbled with her veil and made as though to walk on. Then she stepped back and spoke directly to Aline:

"But I have not forgotten him. Tell him so."

She hurried away; Stephen and Aline stared after her until the winter evening reached out grey fingers to her and her black, trailing garments, and blotted her out of their sight.

CHAPTER XIX

PRINCE CHARMING—PATERFAMILIAS

IT was nearly a week before Aline delivered Arabella Cave's message to her father.

It had been a strangely crowded week, with sections of it blocked out from the rest of time. There had been the visit to Christopher's laboratories, with its intoxicating illusion of standing at the hub of human progress. Then there had been the belated advocacy of the cause of Marterson, the architect. Marterson's work had come in for some balanced criticism, and she was not sure how his chances stood, was not even sure that she wished him to have the contract unless she could be quite convinced that he would fulfil it better than anyone else.

Then there had been another meeting, ordained by chance. They had met at dusk in the Park, and together had stood on the bridge and looked out over the grey water and the bleak, black trees, and they had talked. . . . By some swift, unreasoning process, Aline had discovered in that beauty-laden hour that Christopher Cordant was not a happy man. It seemed absurd on the face of it, yet it was undoubtedly true. Perhaps his family had a perverted genius for unhappiness.

She was curled up in one of her mother's big chairs dreaming of grey waters and black, winter-bound trees, when there flitted into her mind the sad, shrivelled woman she had met on that very spot who was Christopher Cordant's half-sister.

"Oh!" said Aline, breathlessly.

Sir Rowland jumped. He had been rather jumpy lately, Aline had noticed. Lady Margaret had noticed it, too, judging by her quick glance at him.

"I had a message to give to you last Friday, daddy,

and I've only just thought of it. But there's no harm done. It was the day I went out in Stephen's car."

"I remember," said Lady Margaret, putting down her magazine. "The day you called on Mr. Cordant. You didn't tell us whether you had any luck with your architect."

"Oh yes, Marterson! Mr. Cordant is thinking it over. I'm forgetting everything nowadays. On the way back we—Stephen and I—stopped in the Park, and a poor, dear, shrivelled old maid out of a story-book spoke to Stephen, and he introduced me. He called her 'Aunt Araby.' She was Miss Arabella Cave. Do you know her, daddy?"

Sir Rowland looked at his wife before answering.

"Yes, in a sense, my dear, in a sense!" he answered. "I knew her a great many years ago—before you were born. . . . This pipe-lighter stunt you've been pushing lately doesn't work. . . . It was very kind of her to send me a message. Hadn't I better hear what it is?"

"Oh, just that and no more. It wasn't really a message. She asked who my father was, and Stephen told her. I asked if she knew you, and she said she used to, and that you had probably forgotten her, but she hadn't forgotten you and I was to tell you so. She thoroughly enjoyed making a little mystery of it. She seems rather a lonely old thing. The others fight shy of her. I think I'm going to look her up."

Lady Margaret made a quick movement, as quickly suppressed.

"I don't think I'd do that if I were you, dear," she said.

"Quite so! Very unwise!" ejaculated Sir Rowland, still struggling with his pipe-lighter. "Great mistake to rout out elderly ladies. They don't understand that sort of thing. Much rather be left alone."

Aline uncurled herself and looked from one to the other. Neither would meet her inquiring gaze. She sat up very straight, her velvety eyes wide, her hair ruffled.

"Have I dropped a brick, Little 'Un?" she asked. Lady Margaret rose and came to the big chair and, sitting on the arm, caressed the ruffled head.

"You have, dearest. But I don't think it matters. Does it, Rowland?"

"Sorry, daddy!" Aline flushed a little. "It's to do with my calling on Miss Cave, isn't it? We'll wash it out."

"In deference to the fond parents' wishes, eh, Aline?" jerked Sir Rowland. "Too late for that . . . Victorian era! Well . . ." He drew a long, vague breath. He was not often embarrassed, and it did not suit him. "I was engaged to Miss Cave before I met your mother. There you have it, my dear. It wasn't a very large brick, was it?"

Aline instinctively twisted round to look up into her mother's face. Lady Margaret's smile thanked her for the little loyalty, and immediately Aline was demanding details.

"How delightful! But she looks much too old. Why did she turn you down, daddy?—because you were too young?"

"She's younger than I am," said Sir Rowland. "I'm sorry you think she looks old—does she really look old?"

Aline scrutinised her mental picture of Miss Arabella Cave in her heavy crape.

"I suppose not very old, now I come to think of it. No, not old in years, but somehow—finished. I would so like to know why she refused you, daddy."

"She didn't turn me down, Aline. That's the devil of it, if you want to know. I beg your pardon, my dear," he added hastily to Lady Margaret, "but everyone uses these expressions nowadays."

Aline frowned, puzzled. Sir Rowland's embarrassment was increasing, and Lady Margaret was sitting very still. Again Aline looked up for guidance.

"I'm not trying to pry, Little 'Un, but he's trying to tell me something, and I'm too stupid to get it. Why is it the devil of it if she didn't turn him down? He turned her down, I suppose. Wasn't it the thing to do in those dark ages?"

"You have a shot at it, Little 'Un," said Sir Rowland.

Lady Margaret nodded. She disdained explanations as a rule. When the necessity arose she would reveal her point of view in a flash that had the charm of the 'nineties and the illumination of to-morrow. But to protect her man from an emotional jar she was ready at a moment's notice to become laboriously didactic.

"When your father was left penniless, as a young man, he was very hard up for a number of years," began Lady Margaret. "So was Miss Cave. Her step-father, Mr.

Charles Cordant, was then still alive, and as this second marriage had displeased old Mr. Blenkiron—Miss Cave's uncle—the ménage was an extremely modest one. Well, your father and Miss Arabella met and became engaged, and for seven years he slaved for the means of providing their future home. She, I've no doubt, did her part. Then your father, at the end of the seven years, found that he no longer wished to marry her."

"Your fault, Little 'Un?"

"No," cut in Sir Rowland. He rose and stood before the hearth, his hands deep in his pockets. "I had seen that the marriage would be a failure before I met your mother—though I met her soon afterwards. I don't suppose anyone but you two would believe that."

"Your father told her so," continued Lady Margaret. "I know that he told her so—beautifully. She behaved with complete propriety, returned his presents and gave him instant release. But I'm afraid she resented it. When your father and I met shortly afterwards, the fact that I had a little money and could be of use to Rowland socially made it fatally easy for Miss Cave to believe that your father had simply tossed her aside in order to make a mercenary marriage. I don't accuse her of inventing the tale. There were plenty who were telling it, and they found in her a ready listener."

There was a silence; a longer silence than Lady Margaret had expected. She released her daughter gently and moved away to her husband, slipping a hand round his arm.

Aline's bright head was bent. When she spoke her voice held a note that was new to it.

"Seven years! Seven years of longing and planning and dreaming! And then—loneliness and might-have-been. And I called her a shrivelled old maid! When I said that it must have sounded like one of those cruel jokes that spoil the Sullivan operas."

"Nonsense!" protested Sir Rowland. "No comparison! You didn't know the full facts. Wouldn't have let your mother tell them but for the conviction that the poor lady—Miss Arabella—has never found it in her heart to forgive me."

"As an individual, do you mean?" Aline's face was still averted. "I can imagine myself in such circumstances

being terribly angry with Fate, and acid and miserable—but not hating the man. I would feel proud that he had once loved me, grateful that he had saved me from the humiliation of finding out the later truth myself. It would make up for the pain of seeing the man you loved married to another.”

Lady Margaret's hand slipped from her husband's wrist. She stood looking intently at all she could glimpse of Aline's face.

“You're twenty-two, Aline,” said Sir Rowland, whimsically. “People don't feel like that in the forties and the fifties. Anyway, we have reason to believe that Miss Cave would injure me—us—if she could. I've an inkling that she tried before, but she hadn't much weight then. Now, I understand, she's inherited a quarter of a million. So has her brother Turley. And Western Coalfields is going to be too high a fence for—either Turley Cave or me.”

That brought Aline to her feet.

“Really, daddy? It's as serious as that? Oh, darlings, I'm so sorry for you both!”

She whirled up to them and flung an arm round each.

“Don't worry—we'll have a teeny cottage in the country, and I'll keep fowls and the Little 'Un shall do the loveliest embroideries for the church bazaar.” She drew back and surveyed them tremulously.

Lady Margaret went back to her chair. Some inner tumult made her hands unsteady as she picked up her magazine.

“You're old enough to understand how young you are, Aline,” she said. “It's a dear *young* wish—to want to make friends with Miss Arabella. But we older people fear that she might look upon your presence in her house—your very being—as a gibe at her misery.”

Aline's eyes were starry.

“Yes, for the first five minutes! Don't you see, dears, she has probably been dreaming about me for the last twenty years or more? I'm sure she has. That's why she was rather odd in her manner when we were introduced. She has been thinking of me as a hunchback with a squint—and sometimes as a beautiful languorous goddess. If she's still miserable about daddy, I'm one of the best cures. But the best of all is daddy himself.”

"Me! What on earth do you mean? Me?" demanded Sir Rowland.

"For a quarter of a century, daddy, you've been a Prince Charming to that poor dear soul. The Prince Charming would have been hers but for an unlucky chance. If you're really sorry you've made her unhappy, let her have a good look at you, daddy."

"Aline!" His voice was a little gruff. She was by his side again in an instant.

"You're the darlindest old daddy in the world, but you really aren't a Prince Charming. And yet you're being dreamt about, daddy. Now is the time that you're really cheating her."

"Aline, be careful! You're still young enough to hurt," flashed Lady Margaret.

"And old enough for you to defend daddy against me—too old to be sent to bed for impertinence! I could only hurt daddy if I wanted to hurt him—so there's no need to stick up for him, Little 'Un. As for his being hurt because I tell him he's not a matinee idol—which he knows he isn't—well, you love him so much that it's all there is of you—but you couldn't dream about him, could you? Own up, Little 'Un? Ah, you see!"—for Lady Margaret, laughing unsteadily, had shaken her head.

"What on earth should I want to be dreamt about for?" demanded Sir Rowland.

"I know what the young bull in a china-shop means" said Lady Margaret, "She has guessed that when you're as old as we are, Rowland, the glamour has worn off."

"But it hasn't!" protested Sir Rowland.

"Thank you, dear. But it has. And she wouldn't believe us if we denied it. When I first saw you I thought that with a blow of your fist you could beat the strongest man to the ground—I thought that statesmen only needed you to guide them to the millennium, that every woman in England must want to scratch my eyes out."

"Ah . . . oh . . . ah!" muttered Sir Rowland. "I must say, my dear, if I had known all that, I—well, dash it!—how I must have shattered your illusions!"

"You have," said Lady Margaret. "But they were the illusions of my own desires that you shattered. You taught me that I didn't want men to be felled with a blow of your fist—that I would grudge every minute you spent

with old political fogies—you taught me that I was so happy myself that I didn't want any other woman to be unhappy enough to want to scratch my eyes out. I never dream about you, Rowland—except sometimes the dream that you need me and I have failed you—and that is my worst nightmare. I don't dream about you. I wake and listen to your snoring—and sometimes wonder what I would do with myself if you were not there to snore. Aline can't understand that yet. She looks at love through the *couleur de rose* of youth."

"And so does Miss Cave," cut in Aline. "Do you think she has ever discarded her *couleur de rose*, Little 'Un?—because I don't. If that were to happen to me now—and my Prince Charming rode away—in forty years time I would still think of him as a handsome young, black-haired, keen-featured athlete, bursting with mental energy——"

She bit off her words with a gasp. Lady Margaret's blue eyes, shadowed with fear, were gazing into hers.

"Yes, Aline?"

"Nothing." She hurried on, a little paler than usual. "I was going to say that, unless the fond parents positively forbid it, I'm going round to call on Miss Cave as soon possible and talk slang and be the Modern Girl with manners that would have shocked Grandmamma, but with heart in the right place and no nonsense. Think I can manage it, Little 'Un?"

"The shocking manners part of the programme carried *nem. con.*!" exclaimed Sir Rowland. "Turn her out, Little 'Un. Is this your *boudoir* or is it not? She's lured us into an intimate discussion, and at the end of it all she's going to do exactly what she intended to do at the start."

Aline blew them a kiss apiece and went lightly away. Her mother's eyes remained upon her slender figure in its shimmering cream and gold until the door closed. Then—

"Roly," she said sharply.

"Little 'Un?" Sir Rowland sounded as though his thoughts were at a distance.

Lady Margaret looked at him, hesitated, then looked down again.

"Let me read you this article on wireless," she said, quietly. "It's extremely clear."

CHAPTER XX

THE FOUR JUDGES

AT any point of time up to the death of Gregory Blenkiron, Arabella Cave would have been genuinely amused at the suggestion that she should stay with her sister Miriam. Nevertheless, within a month of the cremation, she was a guest at the new house in Chelsea.

"No coffee, thank you, dear. Doctor Stanton was most firm on the point. He said that at my age——"

"You're only two years older than I am, Araby," said Miriam, curtly.

Arabella fluttered. She knew vaguely that the difference in years was negligible, she knew also that the difference in age was substantial; but to put that into words was beyond her.

She looked resentfully round the room in which they were sitting. The walls were of a burnt orange Arabella thought "queer," the hangings of midnight blue and dull purple. Persian rugs covered a floor of black parquet, and there were no pictures at all; not even Miriam's. Miriam had introduced her new house to her sister as "soul morphia"; Arabella, turning the phrase over in her mind, decided that Miriam had resented the kindness so invariably shown her, dismissed it as patronage, and now wanted to flaunt her acquisitions. Very unpleasant of Miriam; because, after all, although she had certainly known poverty, she had things that had been denied others—a child, for instance. And she had kept her youth, in a way. . . .

Arabella, sniffing a little, looked at Miriam lounging in a tea-gown that caught and reflected the elusive purple of the room. It wasn't a suitable tea-gown—the room, the whole house was unsuitable; Miriam was over fifty.

Yet she had what Arabella had lost, the strength to acquire. She might be acquiring the wrong things, but that was because the lean years had blinded her to the knowledge that she had become too gaunt for such a blaze of colour, too round-shouldered for a tea-gown, and too pale for purple.

Arabella packed all this into the feeling that Miriam did not care for anyone but herself. Arabella sighed. She knew that numbers of women of her age were fit and active and up-to-date, but then they had never known *suffering*. They hadn't endured what she had endured.

"Your life has been very full, Miriam," she said, plaintively. "You have known the blessings of motherhood."

Miriam stirred on her ridiculous cushions.

"Yes, I've known them for about three weeks! Before that—twenty years of grind, beginning with the wash-tub and stitching and mending and cooking, and then the same with the trouble of earning a living on top of it! If you think that helps to keep a woman young, you're a bit out. For the last three weeks I've had time to be a mother—a *real* mother. And now that I have the time to love him, I offend him—and degrade him."

Arabella was shocked and a little frightened. Miriam's tone threatened discussion, and she hated discussions of any kind. To her, conversation consisted of a verbal contemplation of the obvious. Talk of any other kind savoured of quarrelling.

"But I'm sure Stephen—he's a dear boy. He goes out of his way to be charming to me. I have my intuitions, Miriam. And if ever I felt myself in the presence of a good man——"

"He is a good man," said Miriam. "That's the trouble. He's a good enough man to want to know how I came by the money."

Arabella drew her scarf round her until the angular points of her shoulders looked as if they would burst through the fabric.

"Does he know?" she whispered.

"He knows enough," answered Miriam. "He doesn't know that Uncle Gregory was murdered, but he knows about the deed of gift. How he got hold of it I don't know, and he won't tell me. He doesn't know any more, and he won't try to find out. If you want to know,

I bribed him. I made him settle five hundred a year for life on me, which cost about ten thousand—and I gave him the rest, absolutely without condition. He accepted because he hadn't the strength of will to refuse. But he hated me for doing it. And I hated his lack of will. So now you know."

Arabella's face twitched. She was trying not to say something. Miriam watched her cynically, and presently it burst out :

"Uncle Gregory said you wanted money for Stephen more than you wanted anything in heaven or earth. You've got what you wanted, Miriam." She couldn't keep her face still.

"Go on," said Miriam.

Arabella whimpered and shrank.

"Really, Miriam, you have such an extremely odd way that I——"

"You'd give at least half your share of Uncle's Gregory money if I'd go on to say that I'd got what I want and so I'm glad that I killed him."

Arabella burst into tears.

"To think you could be so ungenerous—because I said something to you when I was beside myself—you've treasured it up and you accuse me of malice."

"Don't howl, Araby. This little talk had to come and we'd better get on with it. I don't accuse you of malice—not in this case, anyhow. I think you really believed at the time that I killed him, and I don't blame you in the least. You accepted my invitation to stay here in the hope of my betraying myself to you. You hoped I should make some slip which would enable you to know."

"You, my own sister, can think that I could have that in my heart——"

"Never mind your heart, Araby. I don't accuse you of hating me. I don't care whether you do or not. You don't want to prove that I did it because you want to do me harm. You'd just as soon prove that Christopher did it, or Turley, or Christopher's wife. All you want is to prove that someone did it—so that you could prove to yourself that *you* didn't do it."

Arabella was conscious only of fear.

"It's an untruth—a lie. It's——"

Miriam trailed over to the writing-table.

"If you want me to believe it's a lie," she drawled, "you shouldn't have left these papers under your pillow."

"You've read them!" gasped Arabella. "Give them to me! Give them to me!"

She snatched the loose sheets of notepaper from Miriam's hand and stared at them. She seemed to herself to be reading them for the first time.

"There's no need to read them, Araby. You know perfectly well what's on them, and so do I. You've written down an account of every minute you can remember since Uncle Gregory offered us a million for killing him. You've detailed everything you did in his room, everything you said and he said, and more than that, you've made notes of what happened after you left his room, notes on the state of your bedroom in the morning. If they can mean anything except that you are beginning to think that you yourself killed Uncle Gregory—well, I'll be glad to hear it."

Arabella gazed vacantly at the papers that had betrayed her secret. In that moment, when all possibility of pretence had been removed, there came to her a whisper of the Blenkiron strength, a hint of the Blenkiron dignity. She sat upright and very still.

"I put them under my pillow because I often wake in the night and think of something else. It's stiff paper and it crackles sometimes and wakes me up, and then I think of something more."

She felt a curious lightening of the tension. As though Miriam were sorry for her. Of course, if Miriam *had* killed poor Uncle Gregory she could afford to be sorry for a mind on the rack, haunted by self-suspicion.

"You've got it pretty badly, my dear," Miriam was saying. "Always dreaming that you did it in your sleep—or that the subconscious part of you got hold of you when you were in his room and you did it without knowing it."

"When I was a child," said Arabella, dully, "if I wanted a thing very much I used to dream that I had it. And then afterwards I used to get the dream mixed up with reality. And soon there was no means of knowing. To this day I can't tell whether I have ever really ridden on an elephant. I can remember the time when I was *not* allowed to ride on the elephant."

"And you can remember a moment in which you did

not put the hyoscine in Uncle Gregory's glass. But you can also remember your whole brain being concentrated in one great burning wish that you could do it without anyone knowing that you could do it, and without knowing that you had done it yourself. The day after, you were quite certain you had not done it. The memory of not doing it was so clear. But now the memory of wanting to do it is so much clearer than all the others that you've got mixed."

How penetrating Miriam was !

"It seems as if I can remember riding on the elephant," confessed Arabella. "As if I can remember Nurse paying the man. But the memory goes on to a prince and a jungle. And there couldn't have been a prince and a jungle at the Zoo."

"But you've had to go to the Zoo to find that there isn't a fake jungle and a fancy-dress prince. . . . But you can't do the same trick in this case. There's no Zoo to go back to. You can remember all that you did that night. You've put it down. But the thing you remember most vividly of the lot is putting your hand in that hyoscine box behind the flowers. Although, for all you and I know, your hand was no more there than the prince was at the Zoo."

Miriam was very, very clever, but she was dreadfully confusing.

"I think, Miriam, I think—I think that it will deprive me of reason."

"Rubbish ! The fact that you think it will proves it won't. Ask any mental specialist. I'll put you right, Araby. Listen. You accepted my invitation here because you wanted to prove that I killed Uncle Gregory. Well, I asked you to come—for the same purpose."

Arabella started back into quivering alarm.

"You ! I don't understand——You wanted to find out whether I did it ? Did I do it ? Did you do it ?"

"Neither of us will ever know, you duffer. But I've been through the hoop like you. Only it's a different hoop. I always dream that I didn't do it. I dream that I funk'd it—and that I couldn't sell any pictures, and Stephen robbed his employers and went to prison. It's exactly the same as yours, only it's the other way up."

"But—but, Miriam, I thought you felt certain that Jacintha had done it! You as good as told her——"

"I know. I know. My reason still urges me to believe she did it. Her hatred of Uncle Gregory seems quite convincing to me——"

"So melodramatic!"

"No, the melodrama didn't begin until she countered Christopher's threat of a public inquiry with the threat of getting herself hanged, and then threw the Blenkiron money in our faces and got Christopher instead of her share."

"Christopher is not putting his share to personal uses——"

"Not yet; but Jacintha will wriggle her way out of that little *impasse* all right. Oh, she's clever. When I think it out, I'm sure enough that she killed Uncle Gregory; but when I'm not thinking connectedly, I'm wondering; wondering whether, when I dropped the tin and all the hyoscine tablets rolled on to the table, I did really put them all back and not slip one or two into the glass of water."

The old clamour reawoke in Arabella's brain. Miriam—Miriam—it must have been Miriam! To have had the tablets actually in her hand must have whirled her into doing what she admitted she longed to do . . . Arabella met her sister's eyes and saw new mockery in them. Miriam was reading her thoughts, watching the pendulum swing back again. What was she asking?"

"Prove it to me, Araby! Prove to me that I did it, for your peace of mind and mine!"

"Oh, I don't know what to say!" wailed Arabella, returning gradually to her normal self. "I never know whether you're poking fun at me, Miriam. Can you really mean that you wish you knew you had committed the murder?"

"I'd rather know that definitely than wonder and wonder, and reason about Jacintha, just as Turley is reasoning about——" The sentence was cut off, and Miriam busied herself unnecessarily with a cigarette.

"You always knew what you wanted ever since we were girls together," said Arabella, fretfully. "You know why you want to know what happened that night. I don't think I know why I do want to know—except that

it's horrible to think that one might have something on one's conscience. I don't really know why I wanted money so much. There's nothing to spend it on now, but of course——"

The door opened, and the newly-acquired Japanese butler entered.

"Miss Prade."

Arabella felt as though she were choking. She must remember to tell Dr. Stanton. Rowland's daughter. . . . She had meant to ask Miriam if she knew the girl, too, but it had been a difficult subject to touch upon. . . . What a mercy her back was to the light and the girl would not be able to see that she had been crying! But why shouldn't the girl know that she had been crying! With poor Uncle Gregory only a month in his grave, tears would not surprise anyone. And her heavy mourning showed that she had felt her loss. . . .

"Stephen promised me a long time ago that I should see the new house, Mrs. Barnaby," the girl was saying. "I rang him up yesterday, but I was told he was away. So I thought I wouldn't wait for him!"

"I'm very glad you didn't." Arabella noticed that Miriam had the good feeling to be slightly ill at ease. "You've not met my sister, Miss Cave?"

"Oh yes! We met the other evening in the Park, and Stephen introduced us! How do you do, Miss Cave?"

Arabella, aware of Miriam's startled glance, returned the greeting almost inaudibly. It was not good manners, she told herself fiercely, for a girl to claim previous acquaintance with an older woman. And paying independent calls at her age! And *why* had Miriam not given her servants orders that would have made this meeting impossible?

"Stephen has gone over to Paris," came hurriedly from Miriam. "He always maintained that my work would go better over there, and he's arranging a little one-room show."

"Oh, I hope he'll go and see Lamente too," said Aline Prade eagerly. "Lamente was so encouraging about Stephen's own work. Stephen only needs a word from someone who matters to make him start in earnest now."

Miriam was looking dubious. Arabella, genuinely at a loss, gave it as her opinion that since it was no longer

necessary for dear Stephen to work at painting or anything else, he could hardly be expected to do so.

"Oh, but, Miss Cave, Stephen can be a genius! He's only got to work—work—work! He knows that. Besides idle men get in the way of things, don't they?" Rowland's daughter was all a-sparkle with eagerness. "They make one feel that they ought to be conscribed and put on to something useful."

"Really, I know little of present-day conditions," returned Arabella. She did so wish her voice would not tremble. "In my youth gentlemen of means followed no profession, but they had their clubs. But, of course, I know that I am behind the times——"

"Oh no, Miss Cave! I gave your message to my father, and he happened to mention that you are younger than he is—and he's dreadfully up-to-date."

Arabella stiffened. An allusion to the age of an elderly lady! How—how dared——! While she was groping for a retort, Aline had seized Miriam's attention by her open admiration of the blue and orange room. Miriam, for all her shrewdness, thought Arabella, was very easily deceived.

Miriam and the girl were talking colour now. Arabella gathered that Aline Prade was not unskilled herself as an artist. Apparently she had met Stephen at some art school or other. Rowland used to sketch. . . . There was not very much of Rowland about the child's appearance. A bit about the eyes, perhaps, and the nose was undoubtedly the same shape. The mouth was different. It was funny how a handsome man often had a plain daughter. . . . At least, not exactly plain, but——she certainly dressed well. That gown was like amber, very straight and simple.

There was that laugh that broke out occasionally. It was jarring at first and horribly modern. It grew on one, though—one came to like it—to wait for it. Arabella wished she were not being ignored. The manners of the younger generation were *odious*!

It wasn't the laugh. It was the laughter in the voice. . . . Miriam had known the blessings of motherhood and talked about wash-tubs. Miriam was dreadful. . . . Yes, it was the laughter in the voice, not the laugh itself. Of course there was laughter in the voice.

The blood sang in Arabella's ears. The girl could not suppress her merriment at the thought that the wizened old maid in the armchair might have been her mother. Why else had she come except to laugh at just that? It was the laughter of mockery—yet somehow it made Uncle Gregory seem a small man. There was that badly-trained Japanese again! Why on earth didn't Miriam have a good, reliable house-parlourmaid?

"The men to put in the telephone, madam. They want to know where you wish the instrument to be?"

Miriam hesitated, looking from one to the other of her guests. Then she shrugged her shoulders very slightly.

"I'll come, Oku. Excuse me, Aline. Don't run away while I'm gone!"

The door closed. Arabella gripped the arms of her chair. It was most inconsiderate of Miriam to leave her alone. Was the girl never going? She would see who could endure an embarrassing silence the longer.

Arabella was watching her. The girl did not look embarrassed. She was studying a book of patterns—heavy brocades in rich, strong colours that Arabella could not see without blinking. The way she put her hands behind her back—Rowland used to do that. And he used to look, sometimes, just like that, as if he didn't know one was there.

Of a sudden, Arabella felt very weak and ineffectual—far too weak to endure the silence any longer.

"Which—which shade do you prefer?" she stammered.

"This flame colour, I think; with a flat bronze stripe to make it more restful," answered the clear, thrilling voice at once. "Don't you think that would be just right, Miss Cave? Don't you love colour? Oh, but you do! Think of a low, long room with casement-windows and cream walls and curtains of pale pink and a carpet of all the soft little blues and lilacs in the world. And straight dark chairs with tapering legs, and tables polished so beautifully that when you put down a bowl of roses you see it gleaming back at you. And a high white mantelpiece with a gilt clock and a primrose wedgwood vase on each side of it!"

"My mother's drawing-room was very like that," said Arabella, involuntarily. "It had a window-seat—my brother made it, and we covered it in—I think in

butter-muslin." She pulled herself up. "That kind of colouring would hardly appeal to you, Miss Prade."

"But it does! I have a little cottage in Devonshire, all my own—I had it rebuilt, and I've furnished it just like that. That was my sitting-room I was describing. I would love to show it to you! It has a little twisting staircase. . . ."

Arabella struggled only for a moment; then she let herself see that little Devonshire cottage, with the porch and the grandfather clock, and the large and sunny kitchen where a mother and daughter could have baked and boiled and made jam But this girl had a mother, a greedy woman who had filched another woman's lover That thought, too, slipped away. The lovely young voice was weaving a spell. The cottage, the countryside, the charm of other lands, Brittany, Egypt, the splendour of a sunset on the sea. . . .

Tea was served. Where was Miriam? Aline handed cakes and poured out, laughingly at home.

"Miss Cave, I'm tiring you! Oh, I must run away! Please say good-bye to Mrs. Barnaby for me. And you've *promised* to come and see my cottage; don't forget."

Arabella tried to remember. Had she promised? Of course she couldn't go!

She reached out and touched the girl's hand.

"I don't know. I don't think—— But come and see me again," she said, in a voice little above a whisper.

"Oh yes! With all my heart! As often as you can bear me."

Arabella tried to say something, but could not. There came a twitching in the muscles of her cheeks. She was dizzy. She was feeling—as if she had been kissed.

CHAPTER XXI

THE SECOND TEMPTATION

IT seemed to Arabella a long time before Miriam came back ; or perhaps it was merely a long time before Arabella woke up to the fact that she was standing by the hearth, her dim purple robe tinged with firelight.

" You seemed so absorbed when I looked in, that I went away again," said Miriam. There was a lively curiosity in her glance. Arabella retreated before it.

" I wish you had come in," she faltered. " I—young people talk so much nowadays, and as you'd left her on my hands I had to listen, though really——" She left her grievance unfinished, her mind groping feebly after that question she had meant to put. Ah, she had it !

" I didn't know you knew the Prades, Miriam. I saw this girl with Stephen the other day, but, as you'd never mentioned her, I thought she was a chance acquaintance of his. Young people nowadays——"

" She and Stephen met at an art school. Her people are apparently very modern—Stephen ran in and out of their house, although he was practically penniless and without prospects. She came to see me at Acton—came in her own car and stayed to help wash up the tea-things ! "

There was a grudging note in Miriam's laughter.

" You don't like her ? " guessed Arabella, faintly and inexplicably resentful.

" I like her for herself ; but I don't think she's good for Stephen," Miriam added, deliberately : " They have an understanding ; hardly an engagement. Stephen is very much in love with her."

There was a short silence. Arabella gaped. Her surprise was so profound that Miriam became restless.

" I didn't know at first whether or not her father was

the man you—used to know ; then I found he was, but I didn't say anything to Stephen."

"Or to me," breathed Arabella.

"You didn't often come to Acton; and, honestly, I thought you'd forgotten the man by now, to all intents and purposes. . . . I really don't see why you're so taken aback, Arabella. It's a coincidence, certainly, but nothing more."

It was a good deal more to Arabella, but she could not find the words in which to say so. That Rowland Prade's daughter should be loved by Miriam's son was insufferable.

All the old passions beat back into Arabella's brain. Insufferable, insufferable! Gone was the echo of Aline's laughter. Rowland's daughter had ensnared that poor boy Stephen, much as Rowland had ensnared Arabella thirty years ago. And Stephen would be cast aside, his heart broken. . . .

"Do you feel faint, Araby?"

"Why isn't she good for Stephen? . . . I'm quite well, thank you. Why isn't she——?"

"Oh, she's a crank, though she is so young. She's put Stephen on trial. He's to prove himself before she'll marry him, rich or poor. I must say she's consistent. Of course, I agree that Stephen could do big things if he tried, but I don't think he will try. The genius may be in him, but if it isn't strong enough to drive him in itself, nothing and nobody else will be. Aline can't see that. And she can't see that by holding herself back as a possible reward—only possible, mind you—she's setting Stephen a task that's quite beyond him. He won't take up a brush now. He'll just go on dreaming of what wonders he would perform if only she'd marry him, and then perhaps do some really generous, reckless thing for her—make some quite big sacrifice—in the hope that she will consider that enough in the way of making good. I know Stephen!"

Arabella heard every word of the explanation, but her mind could only toy with it foolishly. Aline Prade would jilt Stephen, wounding him as her father's daughter would know how to wound! Or she would marry him, and their youth and happiness and wealth would be a mockery for ever and ever. . . .

Arabella pressed her handkerchief to her mouth. They

would be wealthy because nearly a quarter of a million of Uncle Gregory's money had come to Stephen. That had been Miriam's dominant desire, to make Stephen rich, and she had served it well. *She* had killed Uncle Gregory to make Stephen rich. Arabella bit her handkerchief in frenzy. Of what avail to have Blenkiron's money to hate Rowland Prade with—hate him and hate him and hate him—if his daughter were going to be sheltered by Blenkiron's money in the end? It was a crazy wheel, going round and round. . . . The dominant desire, hatred of Rowland Prade: and everything else driven clean away by that, as dust is driven by the wind; everything, everything, even to that age-old cry, "Thou shalt not kill."

No, no. She *was* going mad. They had not both killed Uncle Gregory. Either Miriam or she . . . but not both. Or had it after all been one of the others?

Miriam was gripping her shoulder.

"Araby, you're looking quite grey. You really must lie down—Hullo! Here's Turley!"

Arabella struggled to her feet, but sank back again. It was too late to retire. Turley was opening the door. He was coming in, sleek and unwontedly breezy.

Arabella, noting Miriam's coldness, remembered that Turley had never bothered to call in the Acton days.

"Hullo, Miriam! How do, Araby? I say, Miriam, who's the girl that came out of here about a quarter of an hour ago?"

"Aline Prade," said Miriam, shortly.

"Phew!" whistled Turley. Arabella felt that he was eying her, and shrank further back in her corner. "Aline Prade, eh? That's jolly nearly a knock-out. Where's your boy?"

"He's away on business. Any more questions?"

"Well, I'm jiggered! Aline Prade!" blew Turley. "I saw the little run-about as I came along, but she got in before I was as far as the gate. She had some trouble with her engine and I lent a hand. I recognised her and the little car too, but she was so stand-offish I couldn't get any forradder. Aline Prade! Jolly nearly a knock-out!"

Arabella tried to remove her attention, but could not. She always tried to remove her attention when Turley used slang. The fact that Aline Prade was Aline Prade

was a knock-out. A sporting term, no doubt! She wished she knew what it meant.

And why the juxtaposition of Stephen's name?

"What d'you mean by a knock-out?" demanded Miriam, bluntly, and Araby felt grateful to her.

"Chain of circumstance and all that!" guffawed Turley, settling himself back in his chair. "First thing this morning I get a very civil letter from Mrs. Chris. A jolly nice woman, you can both of you take it from me. I'm beginning to understand her a bit. She's got the artistic temperament, and that plays the dickens. Well, as I say, I got this letter asking me to call. Went round to this Gulverbury Hotel place and had a chat. If you ask me, she was moping. She—I managed to draw her out a bit."

Miriam giggled meaningly.

"You're prejudiced against her, Miriam," remonstrated Turley. "And now she's Christopher's wife it makes things awkward. Of course, we all know your private belief about her hand in Uncle Gregory's death, but hang it all!—nothing can be proved now. He's dead——"

"He's alive in our minds," Arabella thrust in. She felt suddenly on the verge of hysteria.

"I'm not going into that again," said Turley, doggedly, "especially not with *you*, who. . . . Oh, well! I was saying that she—Jacintha—was moping. Chris is as absorbed in his work as ever, it appears, and that leaves her with a lot of time on her hands. At first they decided to live on Christopher's earnings, but, as she said, making ends meet on that might take a bit of doing, but it wouldn't really occupy her mind while Chris is at his Institute. She wants something that'll absorb her as his labs. do him——"

"But why?" asked Miriam, unquenchably hostile. Turley ignored her.

"So they've decided to split Christopher's inheritance. His bit is going to the Scarfield Institute, of course, and hers—which I gather is absolutely her own, to do as she likes with——"

"Aha! Araby, you see?"

"I don't know what you're getting at, Miriam, but for my part I quite see her point. She wants something to keep her mind employed. Domestic interests don't fill the thoughts of a woman like that."

"Can't she endure the prospect of an empty mind?" demanded Miriam. Again Turley hurried on.

"So she's decided to go into the City with her little lot. Wants me to help her to make a million—wants to be—well, Uncle Gregory all over again, as it were. Though, of course, *he* started with no capital at all. Of course, she can't do it; doesn't know the first thing about money. But, it's a—ah—uncommon idea, ain't it? And when she's made her millions she's going to give it all to some—ah—good cause or other."

"That, of course, is the little bit of sugar for the bird Christopher," said Miriam, slowly. "Lord, what a fool she's making of him! And are you going to be her financial adviser, Turley?"

"Well. . . . I couldn't refuse outright, but of course that kind of thing isn't as easy as it was in Uncle Gregory's day. I told her she'd better start by getting into a flat or a house where she could entertain a bit, and then get to know the right kind of people and follow the markets as far as she can and so on. She agreed all right to that, and I must say she didn't press me as to the rest of the programme——"

"Because she's no intention of going on with it once she's got the house and the people!"

"Now, now, Miriam! Look here, you aren't letting me get to my point. When I said that about getting a decent establishment, she reminded me that Christopher hadn't disposed of the Grosvenor Square house yet, and that might do as well as any other. That surprised me rather. I thought she would have a sort of *feeling* against living there; but she says she could bring herself to go back, she thinks."

"Wonderful selflessness!" murmured Miriam.

"Of course, I said it could be arranged all right. Chris was going to sell it, as you know, and divide the proceeds between the four of us; Mrs. Chris spoke of buying it. She suggested you and I, Araby, might like to go back to our old quarters, but I'm quite comfortable at the club—and you——"

"Oh, I don't want to go back to Grosvenor Square! I thought of going to the seaside later on, perhaps, although——"

"So Jacintha reigns alone in Grosvenor Square, with

some six thousand pounds a year with which to get to know the right people—oh, clever, clever, clever! But tell me, Turley—I'm sure you know—why is she afraid of not having enough to think about?"

"Because she is haunted by Uncle Gregory," said Arabella, unexpectedly. "As we all are. She wonders all the time *who* killed him."

"She? Jacintha? Oh, that's good!" cried Miriam, shrilly. "Has she swung that on Christopher too, did you gather, Turley?"

"Look here, Miriam," protested Turley, "it's not decent of you to run her down. She bears no malice against you. In fact, she went out of her way to tell me how she liked your boy."

"Thanks," said Miriam, coldly. "I didn't know she had seen him. I wondered where Stephen had learnt about the terms of our inheritance. I told him I had inherited direct under a will. The other day he taxed me with the facts. And now *he* wants to know who murdered Uncle Gregory."

There was a pause. Turley fidgeted.

"Well—did you tell him?" he asked. "The last time we discussed this delightful subject, you were quite certain that Jacintha had done it."

"Because she's given you tea and told you her troubles, you're equally convinced now that she didn't," retorted Miriam.

"I'm no more convinced that she didn't than I'm convinced that you or Araby—didn't—or myself, for that matter. I don't think any one of us would have had the pluck to do it except Chris, and he would have owned up. Consciously, that is. You never know what tricks you may do subconsciously." In spite of himself, Turley warmed to his subject. "Scientists are just beginning to discover the subconsciousness. People went mad over hypnotism twenty years ago. Now they've discovered most people hypnotise themselves without knowing it. Take kleptomania. Half the cases are just faked. But what about the other half? Any medical man will tell you that, in spite of the fakes, there are a large number of people alive who steal and do things like that and don't know they're doing it at the time and don't know they've done it afterwards. Many of them

will account for every minute of their day to themselves, and work it out so that it seems they couldn't possibly have stolen anything. Yet the stuff is found hidden away somewhere. I tell you, I didn't kill Uncle Gregory, and it's true as far as my knowledge goes. It's a hundred to one I didn't, if you look at it one way. If you look at it another, it's about a thousand to one that one of us did."

"Oh, can't we leave it all alone?" wailed Arabella. And then, before Miriam could add her quota: "Turley, you still haven't explained why Miss Aline Prade is a knock-out."

Turley laughed, glancing slyly at Miriam.

"Took a bit of leading up to," he said, "and Miriam's so down on poor little Mrs. Chris, she didn't let me get on with my tale. Well, after I'd left the Gulverbury Hotel, I thought I'd try to get a few words with Chris. About the house and one thing and another. So I went round after lunch to the Scarfield Institute. . . . Saw him coming out of the Scarfield Institute with that girl!"

"Why shouldn't he come out of the Scarfield Institute with that girl?" asked Miriam. Arabella saw that she had drawn herself up as though in defence.

"It wasn't the *fact* of his coming out—it was the *way* he was coming out!" sniggered Turley. "He was all over her. Put her into her car—to come here, I daresay. I stared right in his face and he didn't see me. Stood talking to her till she pushed off. I hooked it quietly. . . . Pity your boy had to go away on business! Though p'raps it's just as well in the end, taking one consideration with another."

"And no doubt," said Miriam, with a rather harsh laugh, "you took the chance to hurry back and tell Christopher's wife what you'd seen. I thought that sort of thing was left by tradition to disappointed women like me."

Arabella couldn't follow that quite, but she bristled.

"The suggestion is absolutely ridiculous!" she said. "A girl like Miss Prade—and things are different nowadays. I'm quite convinced there was no harm in it." She stopped, amazed at herself.

Turley grinned.

"Not my affair! Besides, I didn't go back and tell

Mrs. Chris. She knows the two of them are very pally—told me about it herself. Not that I think she's quite got the hang of it. Artistic temperament! I tell you, he stood looking after the car. It's jolly rough luck on Jacintha when she's practically still on her honeymoon. And there's Stephen——"

"Will you stay to dinner, Turley?"

"No, thanks, Miriam." Turley was still enjoying himself. "But if you're busy I'll stay and chinwag with Arabella for a moment or two."

Miriam evidently was busy, for she left the room.

A dose of Turley's company was very far from Arabella's liking. Turley had always bullied her from the day when, as a boy, he had discovered that he was physically stronger than his eldest sister. She supposed he was going to bully her now, but she lacked the initiative to make the necessary excuse for leaving him.

"Well, Araby, old girl, how are things?" began Turley, with marked amiability. "Like being rich?"

"What a question, Turley! As if——"

"It's come a bit late in the day, hasn't it? I know. Lord, what couldn't I have done if I'd had a bit of money at the start. As it is, I don't know whether it'll do much more than get me out of one or two difficulties."

Arabella tried to show interest and failed. She was profoundly indifferent to Turley's personal arrangements.

"Do you remember what Uncle Gregory said to me when he was getting at us that afternoon?" he asked, presently.

"I have tried to dismiss the whole matter from my mind," she said, hastily. "It isn't the sort of thing one cares to remember—though one must make allowances."

"He said that a concern I'm interested in—Western Coalfields—would go broke at the end of a week, and hinted that I'd be bankrupt. Well, he was a bit out with his reckoning—but only a bit. There's a man with a good deal of influence, and he's been trying very hard to break Western Coalfields, and he's very nearly succeeded. He has put his shirt on breaking Western Coalfields. You look bored, Araby."

Arabella gave an apologetic smile. She *was* bored; and very tired.

"I'm sorry, Turley," she said weakly. "As you are

aware, I know nothing of the City, and it is a little difficult——”

“ I’ll make it easy,” said Turley. “ The man who has put his shirt on breaking Western Coalfields is an old friend of yours.”

“ A friend of mine ! I think you must be mistaken——”

“ Well, I assume he’s a friend of yours. You’ve just been having tea with his daughter. And you were a bit annoyed when I suggested that she and Chris were getting on remarkably well together.”

“ Rowland Prade ! ” whispered Arabella. There was something—some thought she couldn’t recognise as yet—behind Turley’s gossip. The same thought that was stirring in her, stirring and waking. . . .

“ *Sir* Rowland Prade. He’s picked up the handle *since* you knew him, I believe, Araby. He’s quite a smart man, you know. If he succeeds in smashing Western Coalfields, he’ll mop up a couple of hundred thousands or so.”

“ Why—why are you telling me all this ? ”

“ Because if he doesn’t mop up Western Coalfields after all his commitments during the last few months, he won’t have any pile left. In fact, he won’t have a house and furniture left.”

“ He—he won’t have——? ”

“ Of course, it’s not my affair,” continued Turley. “ But I thought it only friendly to let you know. Especially as you seem to have made a friend of his daughter. She’s a clever girl, I understand from Jacintha, but she hasn’t got any profession. Funny if she were thrown on your charity, Arabella. Whirligig of Time, and all that ! ”

Arabella stared at him. The thought behind his words, and the thought deep down in her own mind, and the echo of young laughter—the laughter of triumphant girlhood for an old maid who’d been jilted—all these were seething and turning and eluding her grasp. She could only say stupidly—

“ I don’t follow you, Turley.”

“ Now try and get it, Araby, there’s a good girl,” said Turley, patiently. “ My company, the Western Coalfields, is a rival of his company, Prade and Watkins. One of us has got to go under. If Prade succeeds in sending us under he’ll pretty well double his fortune. If he doesn’t

succeed in sending us under—owing to the way he has committed himself—he will certainly be ruined. He has made definite plans on the assumption that he will be able to smash us.”

“Then he will smash you,” said Arabella, trembling, cold and sick with the force of her old hatred. “He was always a man of his word.”

“He thinks he will,” said Turley. Turley was not looking at her now. “Uncle Gregory thought he would. They know that my company can get no more capital. They’re betting on that. My quarter of a million hasn’t been enough. If we could get more capital—if we could get another quarter of a million, Araby—Prade’s number is up. In a matter of weeks there would be brokers in his house. And his wife would have to live with her own folk like any poor relation.”

Arabella breathed quickly. She heard that short, silly breathing, and could not calm it. If only Turley would not watch her! He was a devil. He knew. Twice before he had tried to harm Rowland Prade at her instigation. This time it would be final, catastrophic.

“You could see his wife in rags, his child——”

Uncle Gregory had tempted her. Turley tempted her. Her long and lonely hatred tempted her.

“I’ll think about it, Turley. I——”

“Good old Araby! I’ll be trotting, then. So long!”

CHAPTER XXII

THE PERPETUAL HONEYMOON

WHEN Christopher returned to the Gulverbury Hotel a small car was drawn up to the kerb. He quickened his pace. Aline? Then he saw that it was not hers.

He was still trying to analyse his disappointment when the swing doors were pushed open and Miriam hurried out. A well-gowned, well-groomed Miriam, shrugging her shoulders deeper into her furs and making possessively for the little car.

"Hullo, Miriam!" said Christopher, as genially as he could. "I say——"

"I've just been trying to do the polite to Jacintha," cut in Miriam. "I can't for the life of me tell whether I've succeeded. I can't stay. I've got to buy some fish before the shops close or Araby won't have any dinner."

"But——"

"We're becoming a united family at last. Arabella's staying with me and Turley called this afternoon. You are the only one who stays away. Good-bye."

Miriam was gone. Curse Miriam! It was highly probable that she had not succeeded in doing the polite to Jacintha—highly improbable that she had really tried. Why couldn't they leave Jacintha alone? In common decency he must take steps to protect her from annoyance by members of his family. It was her family too, of course—but her tangled, impossible past had made them strangers.

He went up the stairs slowly, and discovered on the way that he was a good bit of a humbug. In his heart he knew that it was quite unnecessary to protect Jacintha from the family. When it came to covert insult and innuendo she was a great deal better than any of them and

could more than hold her own. His real resentment lay in the suspicion that during the visit Jacintha had talked about Gregory Blenkiron. Jacintha would have made no attempt to fight her impulse to talk about Gregory Blenkiron. Miriam's presence would have pandered to her mental hypochondria, stimulating discussion of the disease of her soul.

Disease! Christopher's jaw tightened. All his adult life his interests had been concentrated on warring against disease. Yet when he contemplated Jacintha's headlong rush to spiritual destruction his mind recoiled in fear.

She had said that if he would not give himself utterly to the task of healing her mind of its obsession she would go under. He had denied her what she asked, because to consent meant to sacrifice his work. And she had acquiesced in his decision. Her manner to him had not changed in its essentials; she charmed him still, languorously inviting homage; but until she warmed to his presence she would be preoccupied and distant.

He had found her more than once, on his return from the Institute, staring out into the darkening street, lost to place and time. The first time—

"A penny for them, flame-flower!" he had challenged her. Her unfathomable gaze came slowly up to his.

"I was wondering whether perhaps after all it was Turley. Turley, I understand, was in desperate straits financially——"

"Good Lord, Jacintha! Can't you really let it alone?"

"No. No, I can't. I told you I can't unless you fill my thoughts with yourself. . . . I'm glad you've come back, Chris. Three hours respite for me! Talk to me—hold me—kiss me!"

He did not offer her a penny for her thoughts again during the days that followed. He would glance at her bent, brooding figure and avert his eyes, and wait till gradually she came to full consciousness of him again.

And once he had woken in the night and, hearing a faint sound in her room, had gone in to find her poring over a book on poisons. . . .

She turned to the hours with him as a respite from the torturing whispers of doubt; and he did not forget for one moment, when with her, that he could, if he would,

give her more than a respite. He could give her an abiding sanctuary.

He reached their sitting-room and went in. She was standing by the hearth, her eyes fixed upon the flames. The stillness of her pose sent his mind back to the thought that Miriam had been to see her.

He began to speak, and then, as she did not look up, he checked himself. He had begun to be careful of his conversation with Jacintha and was conscious therein of a certain baseness. In the course of his lifetime he had not escaped jokes about the need for tact on the part of husband or wife, and the employment of tact had always seemed to him a confession of conjugal failure.

"Hullo, lady! I've just run into Miriam. She was in the dickens of a hurry."

Jacintha's dark head moved slightly in his direction like a flower on its stem.

"She was in a hurry when she came in. She promised me two minutes and gave me a full hour. I am driven to thinking that she must quite like my society." Her voice was absolutely expressionless.

"Bored you to tears, I expect."

"No. She interested me very much."

Christopher winced. The absorbing topic of Who Killed Gregory Blenkiron? She was looking at him now, with tragedy in her eyes, such deep, dark loneliness that it drove him from discomfort to anger. And there sounded again in his ears that whisper, that warning that she was acting a part, that her servitude to her ghosts was but a pretence. . . .

"Oh, let me forget them all for a little bit, Turley and Miriam and Arabella!" She stretched her arms up and out with a lithe grace that pleased his eye even while his hostility grew towards her. She had come close to him. "Banish them, Christopher."

"It is for you to do that," he told her, and watched the inevitable gesture of despair.

"I cannot. I haven't your drug of mental absorption. But I am going to have one."

Christopher had turned impatiently away, but the last words arrested him. What was she getting at now? So he phrased it to himself, and then regretted it.

"You're going to take up something, dear?"

"Yes. The other day you offered me half your inheritance, Christopher."

"I gave it to you. The arrangements I spoke of are complete. The money is yours."

"Thank you. I thank you very much indeed. I am going to take up finance."

He stared.

"Finance?"

"I want to make a million as *he* did. I want to be a power like *he* was. It's the only way that occurs to me of fighting him. If I can be better at money-spinning than he was, I can thrust the memory of him out of my life."

"It's a good enough idea," said Christopher, after a pause. He was very much taken aback. "The objections to it are entirely practical. Gregory Blenkiron made his million thirty or forty years ago; conditions have changed since then. His ships——"

"I know all the objections. Turley enumerated them."

"Turley!"

"He came to see me to-day. He half suggested this idea to me."

Christopher studied her. She looked and spoke exactly as she had looked and spoken when she was secretary to Gregory Blenkiron. The mood at the moment was evidently one of business-like calm.

"Turley said that the best way to begin would be to take a house or a flat somewhere and get to know the right people. That rather confuses our private programme, Christopher, so I suggest we look about for our own little place, as we planned, and live on the six hundred a year you make. Then I can have a house somewhere, to entertain in and so on, and a City office. They will balance your Scarfield Institute, as it were."

Christopher was silent. A house and an income of her own—was that what she had wanted all along? Then why had she played cat-and-mouse with them all, as Gregory Blenkiron might have done?

Because by doing so—Christopher flushed at the realisation—she had made it almost inevitable that he should marry her. . . .

"I suppose that's as good a way of starting as any other," he said. "Turley ought to know." His reason was shouting: 'It's a childish way of putting a woman

off an impossible task ; just the kind of evasion Turley would choose. And Jacintha is no fool ; she knows that the house and the entertaining is all rot. It's just that she wants to do it, to amuse herself.'

Aloud he asked :

"Has Turley got a house up his sleeve for you ?"

"He suggested the Grosvenor Square house. It could be arranged, as far as he is concerned."

"The Grosvenor Square house !" echoed Christopher, amazed. "You're setting yourself a herculean task, surely ! To learn to forget Uncle Gregory in a place where every corner reminds you of him ! Besides, your income won't stretch to it, I'm afraid. The upkeep of that house is enormous."

"I know. I shall live on my capital, and when that's done—it will all be done. I mean this. That this attempt to rid myself of my chains will either succeed or kill me. If I make my million, the fact that I am in the very house that sheltered my grandfather will only add to my triumph. If I make nothing and lose all my share of his money, he will, by then, have conquered me for ever, and nothing will matter any more."

Too pathetic, too well put, decided Christopher's critical faculty, altogether too theatrical, and yet so hard to combat. He paced the room restlessly.

"You won't expect me to turn up in Grosvenor Square ?" he asked, with an ill grace.

"No. I shall not expect you to help me fight at all," she returned.

Too sad, too much the woman "playing a lone hand" ! It exasperated Christopher.

"What you wanted was for me to sacrifice everything outside our life together, and take on your fight for you !" he exclaimed. "To hold your attention by my love for you, to keep your mind always on an idyll——"

"Yes, for you promised me just that." Her voice rose passionately. The cool secretary was gone, and in her place was the clinging, yielding woman whose hair he had kissed under a Sicilian moon. "You said you would fight with me, and because you find that it will take a lifetime instead of a leisure hour, you break your pledge !"

"I know. I know. Don't let's go into that again. I know I've failed you. I'm terribly sorry."

"Christopher, being sorry won't save me. Help me! Go back with me to Sicily and let it be as it was such a short time ago." She was at his side, an arm across his shoulders, her pleading lips close to his. "It's so unlikely I shall be able to conquer grandfather. Don't let me drift on to failure and madness alone—don't—don't!"

He struggled with an impulse to jerk her away from him.

"Jacintha, I can't leave my work."

She shivered, and presently retreated again to the fire. There was a long silence.

"If you would only try," said Christopher, desperately, "you could keep your thoughts from Gregory Blenkiron; but there appears to be nothing for you but the device of my giving up my life to cure you and some elaborate scheme like this finance idea. Between those two extremes you abandon yourself to your obsession. And you're not idle, that's the amazing part of it. You go flat-hunting, and servant-hunting, and so on—I suppose that doesn't exactly take much brain."

"It doesn't."

"Look here, Jacintha, can't you make any resistance at all? In small ways, I mean? For instance, you've had Turley and Miriam here to-day. Did you make any real effort to keep off the subject of Uncle Gregory's death?"

He could not see her face.

"It's so hard to say, Christopher. You see, we all suffer from the same disease. Turley and Miriam would call it a bond of interest. We shall all be seeing each other again and again until we've discovered who killed my grandfather. That was what really brought Turley round here this afternoon."

"This is a bit thick!" muttered Christopher. "Does Turley think that you did it?"

"I don't think so," answered Jacintha, sombrely. "I think that he's most inclined to think Arabella did it; chiefly because he's beginning to wonder whether he did it himself. He talked to me a good deal about kleptomania, and how people do things without knowing it."

"Pah! I guessed all that psychological quackery would step in and make trouble," said Christopher. "What did you say to him?"

"I sympathised with him, and agreed that he was

quite probably right and that he had killed my grandfather. Then we both discovered that it didn't matter very much. I told him it mattered a great deal to me—and then he was very sympathetic. Miriam, of course, was rather different in her method of attack. You see, she thinks I did it—if she didn't do it herself."

Christopher bit back his irritation and turned to the door.

"I think I won't change," he said. "I thought of going back to the Institute after dinner, if you don't mind."

"The work you can't leave. You're sure it *is* the work, Christopher?"

"What do you mean?" he snapped.

Her mood had changed again. She was faintly scornful, self-possessed, very casual. And again the uncomplimentary question flashed through his mind—what was she getting at *now*?

"Miriam did not spend an hour in not telling me I had poisoned my grandfather."

"It's really of no interest to me——"

"She told me what a charming, beautiful, and accomplished girl Aline Prade is, and how pleased her people are that she's beginning to take an interest in science. We only had an hour together, so there was scarcely time to talk about anything else."

Christopher stood very still. He had not fully grasped the significance of her words, but he had grasped the significance of her voice. She was putting him in a position of which he understood nothing but the necessity to take a step forward.

"There was a sort of digression—what you would probably call a footnote—on the old tom-boy theme," she continued. She laughed—a sophisticated little laugh. "You know the tom-boy legend, Christopher? The unawakened child-woman who is so free in her comings and goings with men that, if her parents aren't careful, nasty-minded people will soon be saying—and so on."

There was no longer any doubt as to the significance of her words. Christopher felt his cheeks burning with humiliation. To be accused of philandering! It was so absurd that, trembling on the brink of fierce anger, he toppled on the reverse side and burst into genuine laughter.

"Well, I'm jiggered! Poor, dear old disappointed Miriam puts you on your guard against the base instincts of the best of husbands. And you, my dear, within a week or so of your honeymoon, have swallowed it whole, and you're looking on my sleeve to see if there's a tell-tale hair. . . ." He sobered. "It's a confoundedly rotten way to speak of a girl like Aline Prade. Miriam is a jaundiced old cat."

"Why give her a chance to stretch her claws?"

"I haven't. I may have seen Miss Prade a dozen or so times."

"Exactly," cut in Jacintha. "A dozen or so times in less than a month."

"Oh!" said Christopher. He pulled out a pipe and began to fill it. "Let's get this clearly, Jacintha. Are we discussing Miriam's maliciousness—or are we discussing whether, in point of fact, I am flirting with Aline Prade, running after her, philandering with her—I don't know the jargon."

"I don't know, either, Christopher. I was merely passing on Miriam's hints."

Christopher's pipe was alight before he answered.

"One of the advantages of being married is that one need not give or take hints," he said. "One can speak with complete immodesty. Do you think that a part of my feeling for yourself has been diverted, or is in danger of being diverted, to Aline Prade?"

"Let us go to Sicily," said Jacintha.

"I've explained why I can't do that, Jacintha."

"You said you could not leave your work. You've left it—I think you said—a dozen or so times during the last month."

Christopher was thinking: "She is angry herself, and she is trying to make me angry."

"Here's another little row cropping up, Jacintha. Let's go carefully. . . . Ready? The reason we have these rows is that our points of view differ a very great deal upon the main things of life. Your point of view in this matter is that a man only enjoys the society of a woman if he may make love to her, or if he has the hope of being able to make love to her when he has prepared the ground. It may be true of many men, but it isn't true of all men. It isn't true of me. I find a great enjoyment in the society

of Aline Prade. But I haven't the very smallest desire to kiss her. For one thing—if you can imagine such an absurdity—it would make her laugh, if it didn't disgust her."

"The innocent tom-boy, in fact!" Jacintha's brows were lifted. Her smile was hard.

"Rather inept as applied to Aline Prade!" said Christopher. "However, we're not at the moment concerned with her attitude, but with mine. I find her society immensely stimulating. I could almost say that I need it. It's a sort of impersonal friendship—no, a comradeship. I cannot actually define it, but I can circumscribe it—and I know that it has nothing whatever to do with the emotion of love—which I feel exclusively for yourself. Look here—as far as personal pleasure goes, I can think of nothing more delightful than to go back with you to Taormina and stay there indefinitely. Now in Taormina, Aline Prade would bore me to distraction, and I'm sure I should bore her. I can imagine nothing more incongruous than a girl like that in a place like Taormina."

"What about a woman like me in a place like—the Scarfield Institute?"

"Exactly!" said Christopher, eagerly. "You've hit it. It's like two circles that revolve without touching each other."

"Let us leave it, please, Christopher. There is no need to defend yourself so energetically."

Christopher bit his lip. Defending himself, indeed! Against the charge of philandering which he had proved could not lie against him. He had the impression that she discounted all that he had said, merely assuming that she herself had said enough to make him break off his friendship with Aline.

"And you are going back to the Institute after dinner," she said, half to herself.

She was thinking, no doubt, that he would have to go back in order to make up for the time he had lost in talking to Aline Prade. It was like her to think of his work as a definite task. Perhaps she too guessed something of what was passing in his mind.

"I quite understand what you've been saying, Christopher. Circles that don't meet. I wish I had a man friend in a circle that doesn't meet yours."

He looked at her doubtfully. This scornful remoteness baffled him. An impulse he could not define made him try to placate her.

"If you feel like doing a show to-night, I'll cut out the work," he suggested. "We might have supper at the Savoy afterwards."

She looked at him sidelong.

"I'd love to," she said. She came slowly towards him, hovering towards a reconciliation. "But are you quite sure I shall not be taking you from your work?"

"I am quite sure that you will," he answered. He forced his eye to envelop her. "But that's part of the marriage contract. Just for to-night we will play and forget, eh, little one?"

She turned gracefully to him and lifted her lips, and he forgot. It was a part of the marriage contract that she should help him to forget.

But he remembered while he was dressing for dinner. It was a part of the contract he had made with civilisation and his own conscience that he should remember. To-night, in order that she might give him the greater freedom during the next few days, he would deliberately make merry—as a psychological investment. It was necessary in order that he might keep the spurs he had won as lover and husband.

By the time he had dressed for dinner he had come to the stupendous conclusion that his temperament did not lend itself readily to love.

CHAPTER XXIII

A CATASTROPHIC KISS

ON the following day dissatisfaction seethed in the breast of Christopher Cordant. The Institute provided a number of petty nuisances and irritations. When he settled down to work he discovered that he was tired and could not bring proper concentration to bear. Jacintha's irrelevances tugged at his consciousness.

Jealousy of Aline Prade! . . . It was perfectly clear, too, that his explanation that there was no cause for jealousy had been a mere waste of breath. Jacintha, quick to a retort and nimble-minded in her own sphere, was by way of being a rather stupid woman outside that sphere. Original enough in the expression of her own desires, she was content to think about humanity in clichés. *Cherchez la femme*, or some such fool formula, was at the back of her mind. She had not the brain to see that the dogma of sexual suspicion was a heresy as regarded men like himself. . . . That foolish outburst of hers would not be allowed to make any difference to his friendship with Aline.

He came home early, feeling thoroughly tired, having accomplished little or nothing towards clearing off the formidable pile of arrears that had accumulated during his honeymoon. Two of his best assistants were waiting for him to digest and comment upon their reports. And he had not yet settled that building question.

He went to bed soon after dinner, leaving Jacintha studying a handbook of the Stock Exchange. He noticed that she was holding the book in such a manner that it was very easy for him to read the title.

He was on better terms with himself on the following day. By the time he returned for dinner there was still

a pile of arrears. Jacintha was peculiarly amiable when he announced his intention of returning to the Institute and working through the night. He stayed with her for a little, and she gossiped to him pleasantly of the day's trivialities. He thought she had never been more charming. He felt especially grateful to her for not discussing the details of her plans for fitting up the house in Grosvenor Square.

A little after ten he took a taxi to Kensington and let himself into the deserted Institute. He liked the place almost best at night, when it was wholly deserted. He had done his best work there at night.

He had a comfortable room, half office, half study, with an extra door that opened directly on to the laboratories. He made himself some coffee and set to work.

The hours of the night slipped by in rapid work, and the pile of arrears grew smaller and smaller. By six o'clock he had finished. In a cupboard-like room off the laboratories was a shower-bath. By half-past six he had bathed and completed his toilet. It was too early to return for breakfast. He lit another pipe and watched the growing daylight with lazy pleasure. He felt a pardonable glow of satisfaction as he mentally reviewed his night's work, and glanced again at his notes of instruction. From outside came the dim rumble of waking London.

A car, by the sound of the engines a taxi, was drawing up outside the Institute. A mistake, no doubt. No one was due until eight o'clock. The next moment there came a rattle on the outer door.

"Who the dickens——?" muttered Christopher, and went down to see. There came another knock as he unbolted the door.

"Right-ho!" he called through the door, and a moment later opened it.

Aline Prade stood before him—Aline breathless and strangely garbed in a bowler hat. A riding-habit, of course!

"Oh, I'm so thankful!" gasped Aline. "I've been riding in the Park. And my groom had an accident. He's in the taxi. He was thrown, and I'm afraid he's broken his arm. Can you do anything?"

"Possibly!" said Christopher. "Let's have a look at him." He leaned into the taxi.

"Can you walk?" he asked the man who sprawled on the cushions.

"Yes, sir, if I needn't move my arm," answered the man weakly.

Christopher helped him out and into the empty waiting-room of the Institute. In a few seconds Christopher had discovered that the arm was not broken but merely dislocated.

"I can put this right at once for you," he said to the man. "But it'll hurt you. Can you stand a bit of pain?"

"Try me, sir," answered the man; "if it isn't too bad."

Christopher accomplished the simple operation. The groom gasped, but did not cry out. He looked as if he were going to faint, and Christopher picked him up and laid him on the sofa.

"There's no more pain coming," he said. "Just lie here now for half an hour or so and then you'll feel yourself. You'd better see a doctor afterwards—I'm not a doctor."

"It's no good trying to move him for a bit or he'll probably faint," he added to Aline. "I'll get rid of that taxi."

He went out and paid off the taxi. Aline was waiting for him in the hall. He closed the door.

"There's nothing either of us can do for him," he told her. "He's perfectly all right. Come into my room. We'll take him home as soon as he feels fit enough. As it was only a dislocation, I shan't fall foul of the Medical Council. I'm not allowed to practise you know."

"I know," said Aline, "and I'm fearfully sorry. I've insulted you professionally, haven't I? It's like asking Mr. Marconi to mend an electric bell."

Christopher roared.

"Thanks tremendously," he said. "I'm awfully glad you came, but why did you? It's mere chance I happened to be here."

"Yes, isn't it wonderful!" Aline tossed gloves and crop on to Christopher's desk and settled herself in his chair. "You see, he's a very brave man, but very stupid. He thought my horse was bolting and grabbed the bridle, so of course he was dragged off his own. I was terribly conscience-stricken and I lost my head. It was awfully silly to come here, but somehow I seemed to know that you would be here. It's telepathy, I suppose."

Christopher laughed again. There was something deliciously characteristic in the idea of a man setting out with Aline to protect her and himself coming to grief and being succoured by her.

"One is a little surprised at the idea of your taking a groom with you," he said.

"It's a sop to the fond parents; Daddy isn't really modern at all, you know." There was a tiny pause and then: "By the way——"

There was a longer pause,

"By the way?" prompted Christopher.

He looked down quizzically at what he could see of her face beneath the hard brim of her hat. Abruptly she jerked up her chin.

"I'm not coming here to see you any more, my friend." she said.

"Why not?"

She did not flinch, but her lips trembled a little, like a child's.

"There are people who are saying that I am running after you."

"Good Lord!"

"You are surprised and disgusted."

"I am not," asserted Christopher. "Someone took the trouble to tell my wife the same thing the day before yesterday. Only in this case I gathered it was *I* who was running after *you*. I didn't intend to say anything to you about it."

A quick colour rushed to her face.

"So you left it to me to say it! I'm glad you did. If I'd just stopped away, it would have seemed like pleading guilty, wouldn't it?"

Christopher was recovering himself.

"Not to me! Not in a thousand years," he exclaimed. His movement of the head indicated the Scarfield Institute. "Lord! what does all this count for, if we're still in the jungle and can see in the meeting of a man and woman only a furtive mating?"

Aline shook her head wisely. She too seemed quite self-possessed.

"It counts as a milestone of our progress from the jungle," she said; "but there may not be so many milestones as we're apt to think. People in the mass haven't

yet learned that man can want anything of woman, or woman of man, but the one thing."

"It's time people like you and I taught them," scowled Christopher.

"They won't learn from us. They would only turn and rend us. If one of the directors of the Scarfield Institute were to come into this room at this moment, you would have to give up your work here." Her soft, bright eyes flashed up to him in mischief.

"If civilisation isn't content with the bargain of the best work I can give it, in return for letting me live my own life, it can jolly well get someone else to help it along."

She caught that up eagerly.

"Then you ask payment for your work like a hireling? . . . You decline bank-notes and demand privileges of conduct! The Little 'Un—my mother, you know—said the other day that civilisation demands everything and gives nothing to men like you."

"No," said Christopher, fiercely. "I can give gladly to the limit of my powers—but it is beyond my powers to give everything. Listen. I am supposed to have made a success of this job of research. Why? Because in something over five years of concentrated work I've unearthed a tiny fragment of knowledge about the behaviour of a certain microbe when he is attacked with certain chemicals. That's really all. In another five years I may unearth another tiny bit of knowledge. If I find out something fresh every year of a long life, the sum total of these mites of knowledge would still be so small as to leave me with the sense of having accomplished absolutely nothing."

Aline pointed an accusing finger at him.

"And only the other day you agreed that you were content to be cheated by science that lures you on and lets you discover so little! You agreed that it is only by the passion for research of thousands of men like you that any progress is made at all."

The light was strengthening outside. An odd discussion for an early winter's morning! Aline apparently saw nothing unusual in it. Christopher eyed her, frowning over what he was trying to say, conscious chiefly of the vivid little face beneath the stiff hat, the hint of bright

gold hair, the ease and poise and indifference of her setting that made of her a thing apart. His gaze travelled down her as she lounged back in the leather chair. She was in riding kit, and she had been astride! The long coat fell aside to show a garb that Christopher had always thought unfeminine.

The sense of shock made him laugh. What on earth did it matter if she chose to look like a dapper boy? It didn't touch the essence of her; expressed it rather in a novel and sympathetic aside.

She was laughing, too, laughing with him, happy at the fleeting sound of laughter. That, somehow, sobered him and brought him back to his argument.

"I know I agreed that I was content to let science cheat me. I know I agreed that a hundred lifetimes is worth the gain of an inch. But why was it necessary for you to make me admit it? Because the passion had flagged as it has often flagged. Intrinsic interest in the work never goes. But the desire to be interested in it falters. Somehow—I don't know how you do it—not by direct arguments, since you know nothing of science—somehow you have the effect of fanning the desire to blot out one's life in a laboratory in the hope of indicating a tiny, insignificant step forward. Something about you stirs up in me dormant instincts—the creative impulse if you like—and without any reasoning process at all makes me feel in myself that to deny the tiniest portion of myself would be unthinkable baseness.

"What is it, child?"

She had risen, and was leaning against the writing-table as though she needed the feel of its solid wood and leather. Her eyes were star-bright, but again her lips were tremulous.

"You have taught me why I am, Christopher. And I've often wondered. I thought the purpose of me was to wash babies and help lame dogs and struggling artists. But it wasn't. It was to stimulate someone stronger than myself to do work I can never do. And I've done it. I have had good fortune, haven't I?"

He knew only that he was profoundly moved.

"Aline——"

And then before the words could pass his lips, revelation stormed his brain. It came like life! . . .

“ God, I understand ! Aline, we’ve discovered a secret. Aline ! ”

It was the moment unparalleled in his experience, in which he lost himself. And in that moment she did not exist for him, though he held her in his arms. He was unconscious that she trembled under his hands. He knew only that a glittering, new-born idea had flashed into him from the universe and that that idea took shape in the contact of their lips.

Then he knew quite clearly that he had kissed Aline Prade.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE NEXT MOVE

THEY drew apart and regarded each other. Reaction, swift and merciless, came simultaneously to both.

"I've kissed you, Aline," said Christopher, with a queer tonelessness.

She nodded. She was as white now as a white rose, but her eyes were more intensely alive than he had ever known them. She stood very straight and slender, her hands clenched; he was reminded of the gleam of an unsheathed sword.

"We've proved that the things they said about us are true," she said.

"No," said Christopher, violently.

He struggled to put his protest into words. "You love talking about things when they've gone wrong," whispered a memory of Jacintha.

"We can't dodge talking this out," he snapped. Aline's broken little laugh brought him back to himself.

"Thank God, you aren't afraid of the sound of words, Aline."

"Go on, Christopher. Let's get it straight."

"Bless you! Well, listen then. . . . We haven't proved things true; we've proved them most fantastically false. What is the distilled essence of their poison?—that you and I had contemplated a carnal intrigue. Do you think I am going to apologise for kissing you—to you or myself or the Universe? I have kissed before, Aline, and I know myself in kisses. Just look at you! You've got a man's hat on and you're in riding-breeches. At the moment you're supremely unfeminine. There is nothing in you to lure the instincts of a man. If you were clothed in soft silks and I had kissed you under a Sicilian moon, then

I could have begged that groom downstairs to kick me. If my wife were here now, and she could understand my words, she need know no qualm of jealousy that I have kissed you."

She looked at him with a tenderness that made him break off, suddenly breathless.

"You are telling me that you love me, Christopher. You don't seem to know it. I love you. I didn't know it until just now. But I did suspect myself."

Christopher took a step towards her.

"I say, do you mean that? That you love me and that I love you?"

"Yes." She looked steadily up at him as he faced her.

"I should like to go now, please."

"Wait! Can I have been such a fool as to misunderstand the feeling I've had for you since we first met? I've felt you about the place—here. Particularly here. . . . I never wanted to touch your hand and I never noticed your dress until a moment ago. If I had thought you lovely I would have fled from you. . . . I shall never know whether you are lovely—it seems to me irrelevant. Lord! all those poets and romanticists gushing about physicalities! They've tricked us and landed us in this appalling mess. What on earth are we going to do, Aline?"

"I don't know. I must go. I am going to tell the Little 'Un. And you must tell your wife."

"Yes," said Christopher. "I must tell her I have kissed you. I'm afraid—I'm very much afraid that's the only part she'll understand. I bet anything she'll say I couldn't have kissed you if you hadn't wanted to be kissed."

The velvet eyes shone out suddenly into light and laughter.

"Of course! Tell her also that I wanted to be kissed. . . . Don't come out of this room, please, Christopher. Stay where you are. I can take Walters home in a taxi. Oh, dear! The horses! I left them with a man in the Park."

"The horses!" The horses were not of the very smallest importance. Christopher's back was towards the door. He did not turn as she went out of it. The horses——

He would have to tell Jacintha that he had kissed Aline.

He glanced at the clock. A quarter past eight. She would be down to breakfast at nine. He couldn't tell

her over breakfast. He would have to do it upstairs afterwards.

How it would hurt her! Of course she would say insulting things about Aline. That didn't matter in the least—Aline was too spiritually robust. She would say insulting things to him. Or perhaps her heart would break and she would have a nervous breakdown. She would say that she had known it all along.

Cherchez la femme!

"Damn!" said Christopher.

CHAPTER XXV

“ IF YOU WERE DEAD—— ”

CHRISTOPHER walked slowly across the Park. He had felt no humiliation in his room at the Institute when the bolt had dropped upon Aline and himself, but he knew that he would feel humiliation in the Gulverbury Hotel. With Aline in his arms he had glimpsed an eternal mystery. When he told Jacintha about it, the eternal mystery would become a sensual commonplace. It would simply work out that he had been alone in a room with a pretty girl and had kissed her. He would have to apologise for it. He would have to tell the tale of a spineless philanderer who lacked even the moral courage to keep silence.

He would have to stage-manage his humiliation. He must not get there too early. He must head off the chance of Jacintha lifting her lips for a kiss before he could explain. It must be breakfast first.

It was equally important not to be late. He hurried into Bayswater and took a taxi.

He looked for her in the coffee-room, but she had not come down. That was embarrassing. A normal husband of a few weeks' standing would obviously go up to their rooms. And if he went up to their rooms, as a husband of a few weeks' standing, he would have to greet her cheerily and kiss her. He could not dodge kissing her if he were to go up. *Gaucherie* was a sad affliction.

He compromised by ringing her up, saying that he was wolfishly hungry and expressed the hope that she would come down at once.

He was waiting by the lift when she stepped out of it. She looked frail and a little wistful and infinitely feminine. There was a silken effect about her though she wore no silk. Fancy Jacintha in those preposterous riding-breeches !

She poured him coffee with a restful grace. Aline might well have slopped it into the saucer. Aline would have been in a hurry to get through with the coffee, to run with him hand in hand into some strong breeze.

Jacintha was chatting lightly and easily in that well-modulated voice of hers. She talked well. . . . How magnificently Jacintha fulfilled her function! She knew that he had had a night of work and was soothing his hypothetically tired nerves. The eternal anodyne! But if your nerves were not tired—if you were burning to use them up in some sane purpose. . . . After breakfast he was going to hurt her. Why? Because she was an anodyne. Because, in her essentials, she had fulfilled his ideal prescription of a wife.

By the time they had accomplished breakfast, she had discerned that there was something troubling him.

" Let's go up, shall we? " he said, with apparent pointlessness, but she nodded gravely. When they reached the sitting-room of their suite, Pinar was dusting. Jacintha gave her a curt order in Spanish and she hurried from the room.

Christopher watched the little bent figure till the door closed upon it. The sight of Pinar always affected him unpleasantly. She stood for a side of Jacintha's temperament that he wanted to forget—the rose, the dagger, and the fan. He often wondered how much she knew. . . .

He turned to Jacintha. She was standing close to him watching him. She looked remarkably un-English, or was it Pinar that made him think so? He took in the ivory skin, the piled dark hair, the whole arresting black and white effect of languorous pride.

" Something is troubling you, Christopher." She touched his arm; it went rigid.

" Yes," he said. How in Heaven's name would he phrase it?

" Are you worrying over what I said the other day about Aline Prade? "

He started; then was conscious of acute relief.

" Yes. At least, I am worrying over what I said to you about her. Now I am afraid you will believe it was untrue."

He expected her hand to drop from his arm. Instead

it clenched firmly, clenched until he could feel its quivering strength through the rough tweed of his coat. Her eyes had hardened to the sharp black of jet. Otherwise her face did not change.

"At seven-thirty this morning Aline came to the Institute," he went on. "A groom was riding with her in the Park and dislocated his shoulder. I put it right. She came to my room while we were waiting for the man to recover, and I kissed her."

Thus it came out, baldly, in a single breath. He returned her look until she moved away from him to the window. She was going to cry, he supposed—on the whole a reasonable enough proceeding in the circumstances. She flung him a curious glance over her shoulder, and he saw that she was not going to cry after all.

"You wouldn't have told me about it if she were more to you than I," she announced, almost defiantly. "You've confessed to me and you're ashamed. That means that nothing has happened that matters."

Christopher floundered.

"It does matter. I'm not ashamed; at least—don't you see that it matters? You must think I was deliberately trying to throw dust in your eyes when we talked about it—her—the other afternoon. I hadn't any idea then that——"

"I know, Christopher." Her tone puzzled him. "I know you meant what you said at the time, but I didn't take very much notice of it."

"Then you are willing to believe," ventured Christopher, "that it was utterly unpremeditated and that I was intensely surprised when I did it?"

"Oh, quite! I'm not wholly ignorant of the nature of men, after all. I know that in that way they are different from women. A casual kiss may mean very little to a man. But I'm glad you told me. I have my share of jealousy, of course—perhaps a little more than my share, and it was beginning to hurt. But now you've taken the hurt away."

He was bewildered and more than a little afraid. He had planned what she would say when he told her, and she had said nothing of the kind. He had utterly failed to gauge the manner in which she would receive his confession. Was her gentleness, her reasonableness, a pose? He could not be sure; therefore, he was in honour bound to assume

that it was genuine. The discussion seemed to be reaching its end without their having come to the point. Would he be able to make his point?

"I believe you're afraid I shall nag you about it," she was saying. "That's absurd. I shall never mention it again—or let myself think about it."

There was an infamous opportunity to end the discussion for the time being—to let the fundamental fact of Aline and himself pass out of the discussion as a trifling peccadillo! To lie to Jacintha by suppression of that clamorous truth! And the alternative? To tell Jacintha that he loved Aline and not herself—that their marriage had been a tragic mistake which they must try to undo—that the gift of herself was declined with polite regret. Already Jacintha had promised never to let herself think about it again.

Yet she and he would have to think about it for the rest of their lives.

"I'm afraid I've unconsciously led you to take a more trivial view of the incident than is justified," he forced out. "The incident can hardly be dismissed as a casual kiss on the part of an ill-controlled man. Hang it all, it isn't as though she were a flirtatious barmaid! I told you how I felt towards her the other day. I told you that she had, as it were, entered the spirit of my work, the essential part of my life. That is as true now as it was yesterday and as it was at seven-thirty this morning. That's what staggered me so much when I found that I had kissed her."

"I don't suppose it was a surprise to her, Christopher."

For one second the rich voice had sharpened unpleasantly.

"It may or may not have been. By the way, I promised her that I would tell you that she—offered no resistance."

"Oh, she said that, did she!" Jacintha turned swiftly from her contemplation of the street below. "You put it 'by the way.' It's the most important thing you've told me yet. If she sent that message to me——"

"It wasn't a matter of sending a message," cut in Christopher, coldly. "We agreed that we must both play the game about it and she—put that bit in. Why is it so important?"

"It means, of course, that she wants you. She wants to come to grips with me at once."

Christopher knew a moment of intense exasperation. The idea of Aline plotting and fighting for him like a villainess in a melodrama—the damnable part was that he could only hope to make Jacintha grasp the position by accepting her view of it.

“Do you want her, Christopher?”

He tried to speak, but could not. A simple enough question in all conscience, but it beggared his philosophy of life to find an answer.

“Do you want her, Christopher?”

Jacintha had been wholly honest with him; or rather, he had no direct proof that she had ever misled him. As a wife there was nothing with which he dared reproach her, save her failure to understand. He must not lie to her.

“I swear to you, Jacintha, that I don’t know.”

“But—it’s so very easy. You must know whether you want her or not. And I’m only asking you to tell me so that I may know how I stand. Will you be frank with me, Christopher?”

“Of course I will; to the limit of my power. But, you see, if I were to say to you, ‘Yes, I do want her,’ it would be as much a lie as to say to you ‘No, I don’t want her.’ Let’s try to narrow it down. . . . If you were dead I would marry her. If it were possible for me to walk out of this room, leaving you to fend for yourself, and by some legal twist marry her—I would not want to do it.”

That was wholly truthful, anyway. If to reach Aline he must step upon the throat of Jacintha—

“Ah!” Her eyes were glittering. He received a swift impression that she knew how strong was her weakness. Was she driving him, then, all the time? He leant an elbow against the mantelshelf and stared into the fire. How little he knew of her, even now! “You see, it wasn’t so very difficult to answer after all,” she was saying. “You have made the position absolutely clear to me. Well—what are you going to do?”

He did not move.

“For the life of me I can’t tell,” he said, after a pause. “It’s too big a problem—it’s been thrust upon us all too suddenly. Anyhow, it’s a matter of adjusting our thoughts rather than our actions.”

“The scales are so unevenly balanced,” she said, half to herself. “She can give you far more than I—she under-

stands your work, which I don't, and you have many common interests which you and I have not. And she has not—my memories.

To Christopher it seemed that she was wrapping the situation in obscurities. They were discussing what they would do, but there was no real basis for a discussion. He had married Jacintha and could never tolerate the idea of tossing her aside. He realised that at that moment his feeling towards Jacintha had been utterly unchanged. Yet if she had told him that she loved another, how eagerly he would have welcomed his successor. Somehow he must try to tell her how he felt towards her.

"This is such a terribly common situation that if we aren't careful our real thoughts will get snowed under with tradition. Traditionally, when this sort of thing happens, the husband wishes the wife were out of the way."

"Wishes that he had never married?"

The suggestion was too pointed for him to ignore it.

"Thought of you begins from the moment when we walked together out of the registrar's office," he told her gravely. "My feeling for you has not changed since then."

She cried out wildly at that, and her mood of impersonal sanity broke and fled. She was torn with her emotions. She clung to him as she had clung and wept when he had said that he would save her from herself.

"No, you haven't changed," she stammered, "that's just it! You gave me so little that all she wants of you she can have and still there will be enough for me—so you say. . . . But think of me as myself, not as a—a—an *undertaking*. Think of me—me—me!" Her long hands were clasped upon her breast.

"Think of what you promised me, Christopher. To help me fight Gregory Blenkiron! To fill my life, to banish him from my thoughts——"

"No one could do that for you but yourself, surely——"

"You didn't say that then! You spoke as though safety from all that menaces me lay in marriage with you. It was like seeing harbour-lights after a night at sea. . . ."

"My dear girl, God knows I'm sorry I've failed you. Honestly, I thought that occupation was what you needed. . . . Jacintha, *no one* could dominate your mind as you wish it to be dominated——"

"You could! You could! You did in Sicily! You

gave me rest, you gave me happiness—and weren't you happy, too?"

"Have I denied my happiness?"

"No . . . Yes, you have. You have called it reaction, anodyne, emotional recuperation, and your long words have spoilt it for ever as happiness. To me it was my life given back to me——"

He put her gently into a chair.

"You'll make yourself ill, my dear."

"No. No. I shall not. My body is strong enough. See, I am calm again. . . . No, let me finish. Only a few days ago you gave me to understand that I existed only in a section of your mind. I was your rest from work, and you were to be mine. I found something to absorb myself in, as you are absorbed in the Scarfield Institute. Now you are telling me that the Scarfield Institute is no longer—how shall I put it?—the essence of you. It has changed from being an outpost of progress to a place where you can conveniently kiss a girl with brown eyes and yellow hair——"

"That's quite untrue," interrupted Christopher, hotly. "I agree with you that I've let you down—promised more than I can possibly perform, and so on, but——"

"You can still perform it, if you choose! It is that you will not. You will not go back with me to Sicily!"

"I can't. The Institute——"

"The girl!"

Christopher was white with anger.

"This is unlike you, Jacintha. It's merely vulgar."

She sprang up.

"It would be vulgar if I accused you of a furtive intrigue, but I do not. I say only that she has woven herself into your work, into all that part of your life that I cannot touch. Every time you go to your laboratory you will long for her. Soon you will want to see her outside the Institute. Don't let her take you from me, Christopher! You are all I have in the world."

His anger left him at that last despairing appeal. Her loneliness and her weakness filled his brain.

"Yes, yes, my pledge to you is sacred. But you are telling me I have no power to keep it."

"You have not—here. You will struggle to keep faith with me as you have struggled this morning. But

the daily struggle itself will make you hate me. And then you will hate yourself and her for destroying me."

There came to him a horrible conviction that her words would be fulfilled.

"There is still time, Christopher. I can be little to you here, but I can be everything to you—in Taormina. You will forget her in Sicily, as you would forget the Institute——"

"It would be the same when we returned."

"We would never return."

"But my work——"

"But my life, Christopher. . . . And your pledged word. In this way you can keep it—if you wish to keep it. Oh, Christopher, I fear what will come to me if you will not save me! I talk of fighting my grandfather with his own weapons—money and power—but you know how little chance I have of victory. And at night I hear him chuckling. . . ."

Christopher dug his heel into the carpet. The issue was now tragically clear. From Jacintha's point of view her arguments were unanswerable—and it was Jacintha's point of view he and Aline must take. For as long as he lived his own life he must perpetually think of Aline. Then he was no longer free to live his own life. He must go to Sicily, where days would glide into drowsy years—to that sun-kissed beauty where the refinement and ecstasies of the bodily life numbed the aspirations of the spirit.

"You have gone back to our old trouble, Jacintha. Can't we——?"

"It is one to me. If you do not take me to Sicily, you will belong to her. Oh, she may leave England for a while, but you will not forget! She has become part of your work, and there is so little of you that is not your work. And I at my work—making money as Gregory Blenkins did, and conquering him with it—I shall know she is with you always. And I shall fail—and fail——"

"So you see, Christopher, you must choose between us."

Her throat beneath his heel. . . .

Christopher was dumb.

"I will await your decision," she said, and went weakly away into her room.

CHAPTER XXVI

SUPERSTITION

CHRISTOPHER did not see his wife again until lunch-time. He gave unmistakable indications that the subject must not be reopened. She had in effect stated her ultimatum—an ultimatum backed by the threat of an inaction that would assuredly accomplish disaster.

As he turned the facts over and over in his mind throughout the night, he recognised the unassailable moral strength of Jacintha's position. She had been, as usual, startlingly effective. She had not even threatened to leave him. She merely pointed out that if she and he remained in England, the little she had of him would leave her.

She was awaiting his decision. He supposed, if he were to say nothing, she would assume that he had decided against her. To decide against a woman who had the unanswerable claim of wife was itself a degrading conception. In spite of all his efforts, the situation was fast becoming a conventionally undignified one for all three of them.

He felt that he would be able to see his way the more clearly if he could confer with Aline. But no word came from Aline. He was playing with the idea of asking her to see him, when a diversion was created by none other than Lady Margaret Prade.

When her card was brought to him by the commissioner, at the Scarfield Institute, on the following afternoon, he believed that she had come for the purpose of making a scene. He sighed wearily as he pictured the impossibility of explaining himself—but he must not shirk the scene. He told the commissioner to show her up.

He had never seen her before, and was immediately struck with her physical being. A Dresden-china duchess

who had never learned to sneer! There was positive friendliness in her eyes as she offered her hand.

"I know I am interrupting your work, Mr. Cordant—but you knew that the interruption must come, so I feel you will not mind."

Christopher placed a chair.

So this was Aline's mother—the Little 'Un herself! Christopher noted the silver-gold hair and thought contentedly that Aline's would grow to the same luminous loveliness with the passing of years.

"I gather that Aline has told you, Lady Margaret," he said, his embarrassment slipping away. "I really don't know what to say to you."

"And you feel nervous! So do I," said Lady Margaret. She loosened her furs with a pretty fluttering gesture. "That ought to help us tremendously, and I need help. My position is much more difficult than yours. You see, I am bound to ask you a very impertinent question."

Christopher inclined his head with an attempt at a bow.

"Do you intend to run away with Aline?"

Christopher did not immediately answer.

"There can be no question of running," he said, at length. "Anything that is done—if anything be done—will be done with the full knowledge of yourself and of my wife. Perhaps that is not wholly what you meant, and I do not wish to evade your question. I think you mean—Do I intend to take any step in regard to—Aline?"

"Yes—please."

"It is a terribly difficult question to answer, Lady Margaret."

"You see, Aline told me that she loved you and had told you so," prompted Lady Margaret.

"And now I have to tell you whether I intend to offer her the insult of ignoring her confession or the insult of following it up."

"I don't think of it in terms of insult," said Lady Margaret. "If you once start that line of thought—it becomes awful, doesn't it?"

Together they faced the logical deadlock.

"I cannot imagine how you must feel about it, Lady Margaret."

"No, I don't think you can," was the swift answer.

"You will know, of course, that I feel scandalised. So I

do—and I am terribly sorry for Aline's sake, and, if you will allow me to say so, for yours. But it's like being sorry about an earthquake. I know that I can do nothing to affect her happiness—and I know that she can do a lot to destroy mine—she and you."

"Yes," said Christopher, "I'm afraid that is inevitably true. But as apparently that has been done already——"

Lady Margaret looked as if she were going to stamp her foot.

"You are thinking of me entirely as a mother," she said. "But I am not entirely a mother. I am a woman as well, and I have my man. I am thinking about myself and him. That's the first thing you must *please* understand."

"I am afraid I haven't quite got the grip of it, Lady Margaret," said Christopher. "Would you like me to discuss it with Sir Rowland?"

"No, no, no! That is the one thing I have come here to prevent you from doing, if I can!" Lady Margaret leant forward earnestly. "My husband is a very level-headed man. He is very good at finance and business on a big scale, but he gets very easily flustered over anything else—his ears go up in little points—and he is horribly superstitious. . . . Oh dear! I am trying to make it clear and it's getting worse. Do you know what Western Coalfields is—are?"

"Western Coalfields," repeated Christopher. "No. A trading company. . . . Oh yes, I think I remember. My brother Turley——"

"Exactly!" said Lady Margaret. "Western Coalfields, whatever it is, is threatening my husband's position in business—it's taking all his time to deal with it. And it's not only the actual worry——"

Christopher waited.

"But also?" he prompted.

"The superstition. Your sister Arabella Cave knew my husband many years ago."

Christopher frowned. His first impression of Aline's mother had been wholly favourable. Now that they had begun to talk, some strange element was creeping into her atmosphere. Araby and Lady Margaret's husband! . . . Lady Margaret had sent his thoughts spinning back to Gregory Blenkiron.

"What has my sister to do with Western Coalfields?"

"Nothing—nothing, I am sure," said Lady Margaret, "but——"

"Wait a minute," said Christopher, absently. "I do remember that Araby was engaged to a man of your name—I remember wondering if it could be the same family. It is, of course! I still don't see why Western Coalfields——"

"Of course you don't, because there's no logical connection," said Lady Margaret. "Just listen. You are a good listener, aren't you? Because this is the second thing you must understand."

The little lady settled herself back in her chair and pointed a finger at Christopher.

"Your brother, Mr. Cave, is running this dangerously rival company. It becomes ever so much more dangerously rival when he and your sister inherit money. Now, my husband has been led to believe that Miss Cave bears resentment against him. Ah, you think so, too! I see it in your face! Forgive me for saying it, Mr. Cordant, but you and I must be frank with each other. There is your brother, reinforced by your sister, threatening Rowland's business position, and now comes yourself—creating enormous disturbance in his private life. Don't you see—he's superstitious—he's already getting the idea that the Blenkiron family are rising up against him."

Christopher found himself on his feet.

"It's absurd, of course," added Lady Margaret, alarm in her bright blue eyes.

"It's not absurd. It's true. Your husband is absolutely right. I agree with him. I am sorry, Lady Margaret. But I mean what I have said. Perhaps you will think that I am also superstitious—though really it is not superstition. It may be in your husband's case. But everything which has led up to your coming to see me this afternoon is so closely linked with the personality of Gregory Blenkiron, that it's not at all unreasonable to believe that Gregory Blenkiron deliberately contrived some such situation as this."

"But why—how——?" Lady Margaret gave it up and drew her chair a little nearer to Christopher's. "Tell me," she invited sympathetically.

"Gregory Blenkiron was the most dangerous kind of man, who appeared to be a genius to fools and a fool to a man

with a glimmer of intelligence," Christopher began. "I'm putting myself in the latter category. He made me think him a moral quack. He gave me reasons which I knew to be fallacious; nevertheless, he has brought me to this moment in which I stand before you as a moral poltroon, with not even the backbone to announce that I intend to run away with your daughter. It's the brute force of Gregory Blenkiron's money."

"Money?"

"Do you think that money can only buy things? Do you think, because you don't want to buy a lot of things and you are indifferent to money, that you have risen superior to it? I tell you that money has landed you and me and the rest of us in this hole—that we have been bludgeoned into moral insensibility by Gregory Blenkiron's million just as inevitably as if I had accepted a quarter of a million for telling Aline that I love her. . . . I'm ranting at you, Lady Margaret."

"Yes," said Lady Margaret, with simplicity. "I'm used to it. Rowland does it. Good men always rant, because they think in principles. Rowland can never understand what he says unless he begins by ranting. You were going to explain why Gregory Blenkiron made you love Aline."

"I was not," said Christopher. "I was going to explain how he made me marry his granddaughter. When you have heard why I married Gregory Blenkiron's granddaughter, you will also have heard why your husband has trouble with Western Coalfields."

"You go much faster than Rowland," said Lady Margaret. "But please—I don't want to compel you to talk about your marriage. Let me save you the pain of speaking of it. As you have been married such a very short time, and you have already found—Aline—it is obvious that you must have married under a very tragic misapprehension of each other."

"The really appalling part is that we did *not* marry under a misapprehension," said Christopher. "If I could tell you that she and I disliked each other, how simple it would all be! In such a case I would be, if you like, immoral enough to consider that there were no obstacles between Aline and myself. I married for love—love of Jacintha and love of my own manhood—the love of

fighting all that is stupid and cruel which at that time was symbolised for both of us in Gregory Blenkiron. Her hatred of him dominated her, Lady Margaret. He had been unkind to her mother and there were unforeseen disasters consequent upon that unkindness. And when I divided the Blenkiron money up amongst my brother and sisters, I did it because it seemed to be the only means of saving Jacintha from being indicted on a false charge of murder. The charge of murdering her grandfather."

Lady Margaret sat back abruptly. She pulled at her furs as though she felt a sudden chill. But her steady look was not averted.

"Tell me," she said again softly.

CHAPTER XXVII

A MORAL MORATORIUM

IT was the first time that Christopher had allowed himself to think in detail of the death of Gregory Blenkiron and the chain of events that had led straight to his marriage. It was as if he were reconstructing in his own mind a mosaic of destruction.

Lady Margaret sat absolutely still, her eyes upon his face. She too was apparently a good listener. Something vibrant, something generous went out from her to him, and he spoke freely.

Outside, in the corridors, people came and went ; outside, in the street, cars hooted. In Christopher's room it was warm and quiet and attentive. It was as though the very walls drank in the story of Gregory Blenkiron's death.

"And so, you see," concluded Christopher, "there is really a very great deal to be said in favour of your husband's theory that the Blenkiron family, member by member, is reaching out to him to destroy his prosperity and even his family life. You are too badly hit to be able to sympathise with me. But it is galling to realise that it is through myself that Blenkiron has struck at your domestic happiness."

Lady Margaret gave a long sigh and added a little frown.

"That is pure superstition," she said.

"I know it is. I don't really mean to suggest that Gregory Blenkiron planned each disastrous detail. I simply mean that the malicious force radiating from him has, by blind chance, if you like, found in us its line of least resistance—that it has flowed through us to you. It is enough to make you superstitious when you see the wonderful way in which that force has ignored our separate motives. I am as much a menace to your happiness as my sister Arabella, and why? Because that malicious force

has proved too strong for me. It has outwitted me ; it has taken away even my powers of fighting—it has hemmed me in so that anything I do must injure the innocent. Look at poor old Stephen ! He got in touch with Aline first—sort of scout of the Army of the Goths.”

“ You’re being morbid,” said Lady Margaret. They were speaking to each other by now as if their acquaintance was of long-standing intimacy. “ It’s all very well for you to turn phrases round it, but that won’t help. And some of them aren’t very accurate phrases. That about our happiness, for example. You see—I told you to try and get this clearly—I love my husband more than I love Aline ; or rather, if I had to choose between losing one or the other, I would rather lose Aline. If I could possibly do anything to help you and Aline to solve your problem, I would ; but I can’t. And you can do a good deal towards helping me to solve mine, if you will.”

“ Surely you may take it for granted that I will do so if you will only indicate what it is you want me to do ? ”

“ I want you to do nothing for, say, a month,” said Lady Margaret. “ I haven’t told my husband anything about you and Aline. He is too busy with Western Coal-fields. I want him to go on being busy with them. I don’t know anything about business, but I do know you can’t succeed by just throwing money about. And I believe in Rowland tremendously in things like business, and I think it very probable that he will win after all, if he is not worried at home. If you or Aline make any move, the whole story of you is bound to come tumbling out. So I don’t want you to go to Taormina and I don’t want you to make up your mind to sacrifice your wife, and I don’t want you and Aline to do anything, one way or the other. Of course, it would be silly to ask you to keep that up. I am only asking you to wait for a month. And I’m going to ask Aline too.”

“ You are asking very little, Lady Margaret.”

“ Of you,” said Lady Margaret. “ Are you willing to give it to me ? ”

“ Quite willing, as far as I am concerned. In fact, you are giving me a moral excuse for shelving the problem for that time.” They rose and looked at each other with grave admiration.

“ Thank you,” said Lady Margaret. “ Good-bye.”

Christopher bowed over her hand. A quaint courtliness clung to him, fostered by his *gaucherie*.

He opened the door for her. She passed out and then turned back. She shut the door of his room again with a decided little slam that reminded him delightfully of Aline.

"You are married, and you have told me that you love my daughter," she said. "It is a horrible thing. But you are a good man. You don't pretend that marriage means nothing. And I won't let you despise me. You understand that—because you *are* married—I am going to try and get Aline away from you?"

"Of course!" said Christopher, smiling down on her.

"That won't do! You are making it too easy," said Lady Margaret. "I am trying to tell you that I am a scheming woman and that I'm going to scheme."

Christopher's smile faded.

"We shall all have to do that," he said.

"If my husband is hard pressed for money in this horrible dog-fight," continued Lady Margaret, energetically, "I shall tell Stephen Barnaby—and I shall tell him very pointedly—and I shall lie about the state of Aline's feelings. You understand?"

After a moment Christopher did understand.

"Ah, I see. Aline will feel bound to marry him because he will have lent her father money. A moral obligation to sacrifice herself." He laughed. "It won't work, Lady Margaret. Aline is no idealist."

"Then I shall make you tell her that you were mistaken in thinking you cared for her."

"Dear Lady Margaret, if I were to lie to Aline on any subject she would not even be offended. She would just laugh. To us—to the way we think about each other—the idea of a lie is not an outrage, but an absurdity."

"Oh!" breathed Lady Margaret, her bright eyes misty. "Yes, of course. I know. Rowland tried to tell me a fib once, and in the middle we both began to laugh, and we laughed till we cried. . . . I am afraid, my dear, that you will find it difficult to forget Aline."

"I shall not forget her until I can forget myself and my purpose in life and all of me that is not an emotional animal. Until I become what Jacintha wants me to become; a dog basking in the sun. Then, you see, I shall have nothing left to remember Aline with; the best will

have gone. . . . I didn't know that woman could offer man what Aline has actually given me. Naturally I desire that above all things, and would pay for it any price but the price that would destroy it—that is, the trampling on a woman who has every claim upon me.”

“I know. . . . I know. Oh dear!” Lady Margaret's lips trembled. “Put me in my car, please, Christopher. I can't cry in an Institute for Research—people would analyse me on the spot—— Oh, *why* couldn't you have met Aline first?”

Christopher felt a sense of immense relief when Lady Margaret Prade had left him. He had promised to take no step of any kind for a month. Jacintha, surely, could raise no reasonable objection to so short a delay.

He resumed his work with a lighter heart. But on his way back to the Gulverbury, he began to have doubts as to Jacintha's attitude.

By the time he had arrived at her hotel, he had decided that he would, if possible, omit mention of Lady Margaret's visit. He guessed that Jacintha would smile sideways, and intimate that Lady Margaret had twisted him round her little finger. Had she twisted him round her little finger?

Over dinner he tried to lead up to the subject. It was safer, he thought, to discuss vital matters in a public room. Jacintha frustrated him. In their own sitting-room afterwards he came directly to his point.

“I've been thinking—would you be willing to let things remain exactly as they are for one month from to-day? You see, if we decide to go to Taormina, it will mean making a lot of arrangements and I have—things are rather complicated just now.”

“If we decide to go to Taormina,” said Jacintha.

“I will not pretend that I have made up my mind on the point,” said Christopher. “You are well aware that I have matters to consider beyond my own desires. For one thing——”

“I don't want any reasons,” said Jacintha. “It is sufficient for me that you desire the delay. I am quite willing. We will suspend everything—for a month. We will pretend that we have never discussed—things. In the meantime you will go on with your work and I with mine. I am moving to Grosvenor Square next Tuesday.”

She wandered round the room, touching things lightly, capriciously. The floating panels of her gown brushed Christopher's knee. For the first time he noticed the costliness of her, the velvet and silk and gold brocade.

How would she have paid for these luxurious things on six hundred a year?

He felt afraid of her. She had wanted a good income, a fine house, independence; subtly she had acquired them all. She wanted him, her husband, with a greedy, enveloping acquisitive love.

Christopher watched the grace and beauty and languor of her. Gregory Blenkiron's granddaughter! And Gregory Blenkiron had invariably got all he wanted—even death.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE VICIOUS CIRCLE

CHRISTOPHER had welcomed the idea of a month's delay, but before he had endured twenty-four hours of it, he had changed his mind. He had thought that the moral moratorium would allow him to seek relief in work and gain a truer perspective.

He had failed to count upon the nerve-strain of inaction. The unsatisfactory nature of his work during the morning gave him a morbid fear that he was losing his powers of concentration. By the middle of the afternoon he had decided to do something. The only chance of doing anything lay in Western Coalfields.

In unreasonable haste he left the Institute and took a taxi to Turley's office in the City.

He caught Turley just as the latter was about to leave.

"You City fellows don't overwork yourselves," said Christopher, with forced amiability. "I say, could we go back to your office for a few minutes?"

"Sure!" said Turley, who liked to think that he had the American temperament. He led the way back, put his caller in a too comfortable arm-chair and produced the traditional box of cigars.

Christopher took the cigar, as a laborious means of indicating that he had not come in an unfriendly spirit, and looked round him. The room made him want to laugh—it was so exactly like the stage "set" of a City office. There was the swivel-chair, the telephone, the safe in the wall, the leather and frosted-glass and oak, the wire baskets and scientifically-shaded lights. Turley's desk was littered with every conceivable contrivance for the facilitation of letter-writing, from a dictaphone to an automatic stamp-licker.

"You people acquire an elaborate paraphernalia," remarked Christopher, gravely.

"Have to!" said Turley, unconscious of irony. "Everybody does it. . . . First time we've ever seen you in the City, isn't it?"

"Yes. There's a difference in the atmosphere. I had a vague idea that you would have a window with lumps of coal in it, and diagrams."

"Lumps of coal!" echoed Turley, in momentary amazement. "Oh—oh!—Western Coalfields! My dear fellow, I don't know a lump of coal from a hopper. I back coal-owners; I don't lay fires."

"I never could grasp the function of a financier," said Christopher. "I gather that Uncle Gregory was a bit off the mark when he said that you were going bankrupt in a few days."

"Yes," agreed Turley. "We were a bit rocky a month or so ago, and we're not clean through the trouble yet. You chaps who lead an academic life haven't the ghost of a notion of the strain we're always subjected to. Competition! Everything going swimmingly one minute! Ground cut from under your feet the next! Needs a steady hand, I can tell you!"

Christopher knew a momentary check. Surely Turley was intelligent enough to realise that he had not come up to the City for the express purpose of exchanging platitudes about City life! Better to come straight to the point.

"Sir Rowland Prade is your chief competitor, isn't he?"

Turley grinned, none too pleasantly.

"I can see what you're getting at, my boy. Your friend Prade has sent you an S O S, and you have promised to put in a word with me. I'm afraid there's nothing doing. Strongly advise you to keep out of it."

"I would gladly do so but for the fact that I am in it already," said Christopher. "I have heard that you are out to smash Prade with Arabella's money. I am responsible for Arabella having that money——"

Turley leant forward to pat him on the knee.

"My dear Christopher! I'm not offended. Don't get that idea. You wouldn't be offended with me if I came round to your laboratories to ask you if you couldn't do

with a bit more potassium, as I had got a friend in the business. To begin with, I haven't got a penny of Arabella's money."

Christopher nodded.

"May I ask if you intend to get it?"

"You may if you like, but I'm not at all sure that I shall answer the question."

"Thanks. You've answered it already," said Christopher. "I think you'll admit that the peculiar circumstances justify my interference."

"The circumstances aren't peculiar," protested Turley. "They are absolutely commonplace. Prade and Watkins, Limited, were going for us and they nearly pulled it off. I put a good deal of my money into it as soon as the estate stumped up, and that steadied us. We are fighting tooth and claw. Of course there's no personal ill-will about it! Ask Prade himself."

"Do you maintain that you are interesting Arabella in the project solely as a financial investment?" asked Christopher.

"I don't admit that I have interested Arabella." Turley's tone had an edge to it.

"You don't deny that you are trying to do so—which is the same thing for my purpose. I put it to you that you intend to exploit the morbid emotionalism of a romantically disappointed woman."

"And I've no doubt you think you're in the right, and feel jolly moral about it," sneered Turley. "But all that doesn't touch me. Finance isn't an exercise in ethics. It's a dog-fight. If I can find a dog who wants to fight on my side, I'm not concerned with its motives for wanting to fight. I've no malice against Prade. I've never actually spoken to the man. We are simply business rivals. The fact that he is a—er—close personal friend of yours is unfortunate. But I'm afraid you can hardly expect me to lose practically the whole of my little bit as an act of courtesy to you."

"You aren't the only City man I know, Turley," said Christopher, thoughtfully. "The outlook of a City man is different from my own. But I've observed that a City man has a very strict code of his own. I haven't met any yet that want to make money with dirty hands."

"Thanks!" snorted Turley. "Pot-and-kettle stunt,

eh? Have you had a really good look at your own hands, Christopher?"

"What the devil do you mean?" asked Christopher. He was genuinely puzzled.

"I'll tell you what I mean," said Turley. "And I'll take the gloves off to do it. Suppose I am after Arabella's bit—it won't do her any harm—I don't want to grab it—I want to use it—she'll make money over it. Never mind that. You are on to that morbid emotionalism stuff. What the old idiot called the 'dominant desire.' There's a sporting chance that I may pull a big thing off through Arabella's dominant desire. You turn up your nose. Let me tell you, my virtuous brother, that *you* may pull off a discovery in your own line of business and mop up a title and what-not by exactly the same means."

Christopher shook his head.

"We are at cross-purposes in some way," he said. "I simply can't get the hang of what you're saying. I don't follow you."

"You're putting a pretty fat slice of your share into scientific equipment," said Turley, in the tone of one who explains to a child. "Either you're wasting your money or you're helping yourself in your work. As a result of that help in your work, you will probably make progress. Well, how do you know the money would have been there for you—if Arabella's burning desire to get at Prade hadn't tossed it into your lap?"

For a moment Christopher was silent. Then he gave a short laugh.

"A very tortuous piece of folly!" he exclaimed. "You are trying to suggest that Arabella committed murder and that I am profiting by it."

"Well—do you know that Arabella didn't hand out the happy despatch?"

"I don't know that she did not——"

"Of course you don't. You don't know that these expensive scientific stunts you are putting up aren't paid for by Arabella's morbid emotionalism." Turley eyed his half-brother defiantly. "Look here, I don't know any science, but I do know a bit of law. The law says that a man shall be deemed to be responsible for the reasonable consequences of his acts. That's good morality as well as good law. Well the reasonable consequence of your act

in dividing up the boodle was that each of us would do what we wanted to do. You're doing what you wanted to do. I'm doing what I wanted to do—and I'm simply giving Arabella a chance to do the same. And you come in here and bleat about it."

Christopher groped for a retort and could find none. For the first time in their adult lives, Turley had shown greater penetration. Turley was pressing his point.

"I'm not going to split hairs with you as to whether I'm trying to bring a business deal off by exploiting Arabella's malice. Perhaps I am. I don't know. Have it which way you like. If it's all right, you've no need to butt in. If it's all wrong, you've no *right* to butt in—till you can prove that you are not doing in effect exactly the same thing."

Christopher stared before him in a state of the utmost dejection. Turley was wrong, as Jacintha was wrong. Turley was as unanswerable as Jacintha. There was a good deal of sound reasoning in it, too, worse luck! Someone had killed Gregory Blenkiron—that could scarcely be doubted. He himself, as the result of someone having killed Gregory Blenkiron, had been placed in command of the million that he had shared. If he had known, for example, that Turley had killed Blenkiron, he would not have accepted Turley's suggestion to share. Yet he had been guilty of the moral inconsistency of sharing with an unknown murderer while believing that he would have refused to share with a known murderer. Turley had scored.

"I admit that I can't upset what you've been saying," said Christopher slowly. "It isn't my own point of view, but—I see that it is a point of view."

"Good enough!" exclaimed Turley. "I say, Chris, there's no need for you and me to have a row about it. I had to speak out just now—you rather got me on the raw."

"There's certainly no need to quarrel," said Christopher, rising. "But the circumstances don't tend to give us a higher opinion of each other. I've told you that you are doing a damnable thing, and it's true. You have successfully proved that I may be doing the same."

CHAPTER XXIX

BEDROCK

IN the days that immediately followed his call upon Turley, Christopher drifted. He had toyed with the idea of calling upon Arabella, but was daunted by his knowledge of the impossibility of getting her to attend to anything. There came a day when Jacintha said to him over breakfast :

“ I am starting work on the Grosvenor Square house to-day, Christopher.”

Christopher nodded. His first glance at her that morning had discovered all the old, quiet self-possession that had been hers when she moved in the service of Gregory Blenkiron. An easy mood, Christopher reflected ; a pleasantly negative mood. He adapted himself to it easily.

“ If I can help you, you’ll let me know, won’t you ? ”

“ Thank you. But I don’t help you with your Institute, so it is fairer for me to manage alone. As regards our own home——” The black eyes burnt suddenly, then were averted.

Christopher was silent.

“ I have heard of two little flats that I think might suit us,” she went on, presently, “ but neither is immediately available. So perhaps it would be better for us in every way to stay on here for a month.”

Christopher agreed.

“ You will go to Grosvenor Square, then, as if it were an office ? ” he said. “ Yes, I see. I—wish you luck, Jacintha.”

She made no response. Her pallor was accentuated this morning by the darkness of her gown. Her long lashes made shadows under her eyes ; she looked fragile and, in spite of her calm, more than a little pathetic. Christopher tried to whip up his pity for her and reviled

himself because he failed. If only she did not look the part of the woman living on a forlorn hope! That black dress and that lonely look killed spontaneity. . . .

Christopher finished his breakfast hurriedly and, with an excuse, left the dining-room. On an impulse he turned into the reception-clerk's office; turned up the Prades' number in the telephone-directory and rang them.

It was Lady Margaret who answered.

"Good morning, Lady Margaret," said Christopher. "I have not forgotten our little talk the other afternoon."

"Thank you," came in Lady Margaret's clear tones. "Did you ring me up to reassure me?"

"No. I didn't really ring you up at all. But I'm glad you've answered the 'phone. I want to speak to Aline, please."

There was a tiny hesitation, and then:

"She's in her den. I'll switch you through."

There came a crackle and a buzz, and he heard Aline's—

"Yes. Who is it?"

"Cordant speaking. I want to talk to you. Will you come?"

"Yes. Oh yes!"

"I'm going to the Institute. We may as well meet there. Good-bye."

In the street he became conscious that it was a very fine morning for mid-winter. Not hot, of course. Sicily was hot. This was the clear, energising sunlit air that made you think of speed.

"*Cars for hire by day, week, month, or year.*" Gold letters all over the front of an ostentatious garage! He had passed it every day and never before noticed that cars were for hire. He entered the garage.

"I want to hire a car," he said, and felt foolish. To say you wanted a car was like telling a waiter you wanted food. One must specify. "Something that can go, and without any top to it—plenty of wind," he added.

The manager looked at him a little oddly, and began to ask questions of amazing irrelevance as to where he intended to go. He had not the least idea as to where he wished to go. There came a suggestion that it was cold for an open car. Christopher denied it. He was surprised to discover that the hiring of a car was a discursive business. He glanced at his watch, the manager spoke on a telephone, and thereafter things moved quickly.

The car brought him to the Scarfield Institute some five minutes before Aline arrived. He held the door open for her, avoiding the impertinence of getting out and pretending to hand her in. Her shining eyes thanked him.

"You're warm enough?" he asked. "The wind will cut our faces a bit."

"Where to, sir?" asked the chauffeur, patiently.

"Lunch is at one," said Christopher. "Drive as fast as you dare till then."

The car started.

"My nose will go red first, then blue," said Aline, happily. "My eyes will be watery. You will see me at my very worst, Christopher."

She drew the collar of her fur coat round her ears. She had a little hat of fur, too—brown, soft fur that matched her eyes. The wind had brought a vivid colour to her face. . . .

He sat with his shoulders in the corner, looking at her, surprised to discover again that he did not want to touch the hand that lay half-open, a few inches from his.

As the car gathered speed, there was revealed to them an unsuspected intimacy in the fact of silence. It was gloriously unnecessary to tell her that it was a fine morning and that the driver seemed a good man at his job, if a trifle over-cautious. There was rest in lounging back and looking at her body, lithe and unprovocative. It was a rest divorced from lethargy, like the rest of a glad fighter between the rounds. Now and again their eyes met and exchanged confidence. The cold, clean wind sang in his ears.

Once she looked up at him as if about to speak and smiled instead.

"Funny to think that this is a guilty secret, isn't it?" she asked.

"An intrigue!" he supplemented. "Can't you hear that fellow blowing down his horn that he's been hired by a married man to take a girl out for the day. Wait till we tell him we are going to stop for lunch. He'll say 'Very good, sir,' but his soul will be nodding and winking and nudging me in the ribs."

"Do you mind?" she asked.

"Yes. I mind horribly. The first punishment society has handed out to us is to make us vulgar."

"All big things begin by being vulgar," was Aline's verdict.

"If we're going to make it a big thing, we've got to do it over lunch," said Christopher.

One o'clock found them in Guildford. Aline's face was whipped by the cold to the colour of a deep-pink rose. Christopher was weatherbeaten, as though he had crossed the country from coast to coast.

"Hungry, my love?"

"Oh, Christopher, ravenous!"

They lunched at the "Two Bridges." The white-walled dining-room overlooked the river. A shrivelled waiter ministered to their needs, becoming almost human under the magic of Aline's youth. He hung her furs away carefully and offered to borrow a shawl for her from the proprietress.

"I shall need shawls when I am as old as he," she said to Christopher, when their amusement had had its way. "He feels his age, so he sees me old, too. Have you noticed that old people vary in that way? Those that still feel young see us young, and it's quite a job to get one's little comforts, sometimes. Do you know the Little 'Un simply won't believe that I don't like draughts?"

"I see you young," Christopher told her, "and very beautiful. Did I tell you that morning at the Institute that I didn't know whether you were lovely or not? I must have been drunk. You are lovely, Aline. . . . I'm a lot older than you."

"I know you are, in actual years. But don't let's ever count that way. In some things you are much too young to be entrusted with an Institute for Scientific Research. Eat your lunch, now. Don't you even know that eating a lot helps to keeps you warm?"

She would not let him touch upon their problem until the simple meal was over and the shrivelled waiter had left them to their coffee and cigarettes.

Then she herself threw down the gage.

"Come on. Let's take it at a gallop," she said, "and the smallest fence first. What do we want?"

"I don't know," answered Christopher. "Does a man dying in the desert want the water from another man's cup?"

Aline's eyes had the blue of steel.

"I would want it if my need were greater than his," she said. "If I knew he was going to use the water to blow bubbles with, I would snatch it and drink it. . . ."

I want to be with you, Christopher, in all the ways that I understand now and in all the ways that I don't understand yet."

"In the ways that I don't understand, too. They're the same ways, you know. Other women have taught me nothing about you. You've taken me by surprise, and if you lead on, I shall follow you into an unknown land."

"The Little 'Un told me all that you and she talked about the other morning. Isn't she a little beloved, Christopher? If I were to hurt her. . . . No, I must keep to the point, mustn't I? . . . Your wife wants you to go back to Sicily and you've refused."

"I refused to go with Jacintha to Taormina because civilisation, which is greater than Jacintha, has the right to my work."

"If you were to torture her body to learn a secret," said Aline slowly, "society would find out and put you in prison—and a very good thing, too. If you torture her spirit, Christopher, it will be the same—only society won't find you out."

Christopher ground his cigarette into ashes.

"That's a bit thick," he protested. "Can you mean that my work must be sacrificed if it would cause suffering to one woman—in this case, my wife?"

Her brave eyes told him she did mean just that.

"Surely—if my work is successful, it means an enormous reduction in human suffering." He was grim and curt. "Balance that against the misery of one woman——"

"And you've bought a thing that isn't worth having any longer," she cut in.

She clasped her hands with the little excited gesture he had learnt to look for.

"Why aren't scientists allowed to torture and kill a few hundred human beings in order that millions and millions may benefit by the knowledge they would get?" she demanded. "Because the millions and millions have the sense to know that knowledge wouldn't be worth having at that price. Civilisation has got such a long fight yet—up and up and up; it would lose if it were to refresh itself with blood."

Christopher was staring out over the river.

"It seems that you have ended the discussion already," he said. "You've cut away my case for—us. Somehow

—I only thought of it vaguely—I thought that I might pay with my work for the damage of getting you. Didn't I tell you the other day that you seemed to call me to labour—mountains of it! I was vain enough to think of my abilities as a sacred trust for civilisation. Now you are telling me that I must bend those abilities to the task of helping one woman to play happily in the sun. You are telling me that I must sacrifice my life to that."

The clasped hands went up to hide the quivering lips.

"And mine," whispered Aline. "I too shall be sacrificed that she may play. . . ."

Christopher gripped the edge of the little table at sight of her tears. They fell on to her clasped hands and glistened there. . . .

"Of course, there is more in it than that," she said, presently. "We aren't going to destroy ourselves so that she may play, but so that her play may save her soul. The Little 'Un and I talked all that out. We—discussed her rather thoroughly, Christopher."

"Why not? It's the only way to keep sane—to get it all into words. . . . She wouldn't agree; words seem to irritate her."

"She mayn't think in words. If she sees things in shifting pictures, with herself always part of what she sees, words would mean nothing to her; too impersonal, too——"

"Jove, Aline, you understand her without knowing her!"

"I suppose that unconsciously you explained her to the Little 'Un, Christopher, and she passed her on to me. She made me grasp Gregory Blenkiron, too. . . ."

Christopher lifted his hand and let it fall again heavily.

"Gregory Blenkiron! It all goes back to Blenkiron. From the moment when he spoke to us round that table, there's a logical sequence of disaster, entangling Jacintha and me and you and your father. You know all about that Western Coalfields business. After I had seen your mother, I went to my brother and told him that he was doing a dirty trick in exploiting Arabella's malice—and he proved to me that I was the master mind, or whatever you call it, in the conspiracy against your father. He was quite right in a way."

"You in the conspiracy against my father! Frankly, that's beyond me. There's a missing link somewhere."

"The link—as always—is Jacintha. If I had persisted in my demand for an inquiry into Blenkiron's death, the only certain result of that inquiry is that Arabella would not have been in possession of the means of injuring your father. There would have been a post-mortem, and they would have found out how he died. If the post-mortem had proved that he had died naturally, we should have been left with the paralysing riddle of the will in my favour. I might have shared my inheritance amongst us all, but I should not have married Jacintha, because, as there would have been no suspicion against her, she would not have been goaded into refusing a share of the property. It was her monetary necessity that drew me to her primarily."

Aline said nothing. Christopher continued:

"If the post-mortem had proved that he had been murdered, she might have been indicted. She might have been wrongly convicted. Conversely, she might have been rightly convicted. Given that one of us committed the murder; there is about an equally strong case against each of us."

"Doubt!" said Aline, her golden head bent wearily upon her hand. "It's like a fog—growing round us—sucking us in."

"Assume for the moment that Jacintha succeeded in killing her grandfather. It may be immoral, but I wouldn't have blamed her in the least if she had. Making allowances for her temperament I utterly refuse to condemn her."

"Of course. We can't judge her. And her mother suffered so. Oh, Christopher, I do understand how all the doubt round you threw her upon your protection. But—there's another side——"

"Doubt!" muttered Christopher, unheeding. "There's something I haven't spoken of to Lady Margaret. It seemed—brutal, but—Aline, I doubt Jacintha. No, I don't mean that I doubt her protestations of innocence as to Blenkiron's death. I believe she did not kill him. My doubt lies between her and me."

He took a deep breath.

"She's driven me, you know. Not openly, by her will, but by her circumstances, from the first. Always her throat under my heel if I went forward. At first I didn't mind; thought it fate. But lately, since I've known you, she's seemed—theatrical. There's been a sort of reasoning

about her ; a doubt as to how much is fate and how much staged. I've thought—suppose all this talk of being dominated by the memory of her grandfather is a trick ? Suppose her threat of letting herself be destroyed is a trick ? Suppose——”

“ Oh, Christopher, it's what I've been trying to ask you ! It's what the Little 'Un saw in your story—behind your words ! ”

“ Suppose it's just part of the setting that I shall be in Sicily with her, perpetually in attendance ? Supposing it is a move in the game of getting one particular thing—a lover ? Money, power—she could have had them by accepting her one-fifth share of Gregory Blenkiron's fortune. But supposing she wanted a lover most of all ? She would be content with a small part of the share she might have had—she would be content to spend a part of her day in Grosvenor Square instead of all of it——”

Christopher thrust his chair aside and, going to the window, flung it open. He leant out and stared at the river and let the sharp air beat upon his temples. After a moment he came back to the table.

“ You've been in at Gregory Blenkiron's final triumph,” he said dully. “ You've seen him reduce me to the most loathsome type that exists—the type of man who finds it natural to believe that a woman is relentlessly and passionately pursuing him.”

Aline stretched out her hands and laid them upon his. She looked up at him with a courage he had not thought existed.

“ There is no excuse,” he said, “ except that—when I am rotting to death in Sicily, I shall not even know for certain whether I am serving a trivial purpose.”

She still looked up at him.

“ My wise little mother and I,” she told him, “ belittled your wife by supposing about her all that you have just been supposing. We went further. We saw her as the symbol of doubt—living on it, *because* of it. And we said, supposing she uses doubt of herself and others and you as her weapon—supposing——”

“ Yes ? ”

“ Supposing she *knows* ? ”

“ Knows ? ”

“ Supposing she *knows* who killed Gregory Blenkiron ? ”

CHAPTER XXX

THE CROSS ROADS

“**S**UPPOSING she knows who killed Gregory Blenkiron!” repeated Christopher, with foolish precision.

He drew his hands from under Aline’s, and resumed his seat opposite her. He was vaguely aware that her gaze was vibrant with meaning. She had, with a few words, cut away the foundation of his thoughts, so that they wavered feebly to and fro, like silly moths when suddenly a lamp is put out and they can beat themselves no longer against its cruelty. . . . Presently, of course, Aline would open a window and the moths would fly safely away. . . .

He looked dumbly at her, and saw again that wonderful tenderness flash out in her smile.

“Oh, Christopher, you want me to help you—you don’t think me an impertinent little fool! You need me——”

“Of course!”

“That’s so gorgeous I can hardly believe it. If we never meet again I should remember that you once had need of me; I should be—exalted.”

They looked at each other. The little silence was golden with healing. . . . Christopher’s moth-winged thoughts had found the window and seen through it the inviolate stars. Presently Aline would open the window. . . .

“You believe in guesses, don’t you Christopher—outside science?”

“I don’t think I have, up to now.”

“The Little ’Un does; I suppose I get it from her. Anyway, we both guess by instinct and inclination, and ever so often we’re right. When we were discussing your wife, we found we were guessing about her instead of reasoning, so we went on guessing.”

"Till you guessed that from the first she has known how Gregory Blenkiron died?"

"No. We guessed that there is a possibility she may have known from the first. We were talking about her obsession, when the possibility broke on us. She can't stop thinking about her grandfather's death, you say——"

"*She says so.*"

"Let's take her point of view as genuine, first. She is haunted by the wonder as to whether he escaped her through someone's act or through natural causes or through his own fear of her. She wants to be rid of the thought of him—she wants to be sane and happy and play in the sun, and she has told you you can make and keep her so by devoting yourself to her. Well, if she is tormented by the doubt she describes, and can be saved from it by you only, her claim to you is indisputable."

Christopher checked a restless movement.

"Indisputable, Christopher! But if—if she has just assumed all that doubt and fear so as to put her throat under your heel again, then your right—our right to live—is indisputable also. It's so clear-cut, isn't it? . . . I can't explain how we stumbled on it, except that, when fate *always* helps a woman, one begins to challenge her premises. And then, of course, it's quite natural to me to assume that she wanted terribly to keep you always with her. I can see how she would plan and plan to make it wicked for you to leave her."

Christopher drew a deep breath. The issue was, as Aline said, clear-cut. She had opened a window. . . .

"I believe your guess is inspired," he said. "I've been groping towards it dimly for some time. I've wondered, and cursed myself for wondering. I suppose if she were to overhear us now, she would say that we had discovered an artistic way of tossing her aside."

"That is why you musn't try to find out that she is tricking you. You must try to prove her genuine. A person of many moods, perhaps, but all sincere ones!"

"It will be impossible to prove anything about her one way or the other," said Christopher, heavily. "She is so well defended. Time and circumstance have all played into her hands—or she has stage-managed them; and now, if there is a weak spot in her armour, I think no one could find it."

He propped an elbow on the table and, chin in hand, stared into the mists on to which Aline's window had opened.

"It would come, roughly, down to this," he went on; "we'll start by accepting her tale of vendetta and her own failure to carry it out—and through everything I believe in her vendetta and her failure; she was not acting on that morning when they found Gregory Blenkiron dead and she told us who she was. . . . Well, she says the knowledge of that failure and Gregory Blenkiron's successful escape will destroy her. If that fear of impending destruction is not genuine, but a pose, either the vendetta did not really mean much to her, or some one deliberately killed Gregory Blenkiron for her—on her behalf, as it were—and told her about it after she left us that day. I believe, personally, that the vendetta was of paramount importance to her—to one side of her nature, anyway; a side that is intensely—Spanish."

"Yes. Yes. . . . It is much more likely that she discovered afterwards that it had been done for her."

"She has an old Spanish woman constantly in attendance—the one who was in charge of her until she went to the States. Pinar is quite the kind of person to fulfil a blood-feud. But how can one possibly find out what her part was in this one? The woman speaks very little English; I don't speak Spanish. Quite apart from the beastliness of questioning a servant of Jacintha's, there's not a ghost of a chance of eliciting any kind of admission from her. If she, or someone she knows of, carried out that insane vengeance, she'd keep as quiet about it as she would if Jacintha had done it."

Aline sighed.

"It seems pretty hopeless, doesn't it? . . . We must be going, Christopher. My coat is over there. . . ."

"And then there's the other side of the medal. If Jacintha is not posing—if she really is wrecking herself mentally because she was just too late to kill her grandfather—it means that either Gregory Blenkiron died of heart-failure that night——"

"A stupendous coincidence!"

"Or that one of the four people he tempted took the bribe he offered. If I did it—I did it in my sleep; if any of the others did it, consciously or unconsciously, I

don't want to know about it. When we divided the money and parted, we tacitly agreed to drop speculating on the subject. We haven't been very successful so far, I admit, but I'm terribly averse from raking everything up again and making investigations with the avowed object of fixing the guilt once and for all on one of us four."

"Of course! Especially as that wouldn't do your wife any good."

"It might do her harm. It might add to her sense of failure a violent resentment against the person through whose action Gregory Blenkiron escaped. . . . Temperamentally, Jacintha is quite extraordinary; fantastic, but logically fantastic. . . ."

They rose, and he helped her into her coat. She looked up at him over her shoulder.

"My guess has only suggested fresh obscurities, Christopher."

"No. It's brought us to cross-roads, but that's better than stumbling through a desert, with the sand slipping from under you at every step."

"It's a cross-roads without a sign-post, though. We may sit there for the rest of our lives."

"Better than no path at all! I expect I shall go a little way down each road, very gingerly, and turn back in despair."

"So shall I. Don't look so staggered! I shan't try to cross-examine anybody, though I speak Spanish quite well, but I shall cultivate Miss Arabella."

Christopher controlled his surprise.

"Where did you meet Araby? . . . Waiter! . . ."

Aline went out to the car while Christopher secured the attention of the tired old man. She had curled herself into her corner by the time he joined her.

"I've taken all the rugs," she said. "It's going to be *very* cold. The sun's gone in. Tuck this round you at the side." She watched him critically, and insisted on obedience. "And turn up your coat-collar, or you'll get frost-bite. My ears froze once; it hurt."

"Where did you meet Araby?"

"When I was with Stephen in the Park. We'd just called on you—you remember? And then I went to see Mrs. Barnaby's new house, and there was Miss Arabella. She and I are rather friends—or going to be."

"Lady Margaret didn't tell me that," said Christopher, dazedly.

"She doesn't believe it, quite ; but you do, don't you ? Or do you too expect her to harm my father because she thinks she hates him ? "

"Doesn't she hate him ? Her dominant desire——"

Aline shook her head vigorously.

"She doesn't know what her dominant desire is. Gregory Blenkiron didn't know, any more than he knew her brother's or her sister's or yours. I've only got to persuade her that he didn't know and all's well for her—and daddy."

Christopher turned a gasp into a laugh. Then he asked respectfully—

"Shall you go and see her again ? "

"Oh yes. I want her to meet daddy too. I shall arrange it quietly. They won't get on, you know, not one scrap ; and that will show her. And—I must speak to Stephen."

Christopher turned to her swiftly.

"I've been meaning to ask you— How about Stephen ? There were rumours of an engagement, but when I got to know you it seemed absurd. And the other day your mother—mentioned him."

"We're not engaged. But I'm pledged to tell him that I care for someone else."

"Aline. . . ."

"Christopher ? "

"Say it again."

"I love you. You love me. . . . Now I'll tell you just how I stand with Stephen."

CHAPTER XXXI

"ARTIST IN STUDIO"

NEXT day Aline went to the house in Chelsea. In the room of burnt orange and midnight blue and dull purple she found Stephen and his mother. Mrs. Barnaby looked at her with a certain penetration that gave her the impression that she had in some way guessed that the previous day had been Christopher's. She had heard that women of this type possessed an uncanny intuition in such matters, and now for the first time she was inclined to believe it.

"Hullo, Stephen! I've come to hear all about Paris," she said, lightly enough; and while Stephen replied she noticed that his mother had become friendly again. It was as if she were pleased about Christopher. Where was Miss Arabella?

Stephen was talking about Paris. Stephen was very literal minded. Aline felt that he might have guessed she knew Paris quite well herself. Mrs. Barnaby did guess it, to judge by the lift of her eyebrows.

"Your French must be ever so much better than I suspected, Stephen," she put in flippantly.

"My French is good enough to ask for an interpreter," replied Stephen. "Anyhow I fixed it. The Mater's going to get her chance in three months."

Aline thought the phrase singularly ill-chosen. Patronage from Stephen, the inert, made one want to laugh! She caught Mrs. Barnaby's eye. Mrs. Barnaby's eye said quite plainly that she was aware of the patronage, but that she was going to exhibit her paintings nevertheless, her interest in her work not having ceased with the necessity for it, as Stephen's had.

The old regret welled up in Aline. If only Stephen, with his potentialities, could have had that fire, that urge!

"I'm going to dig out my sister," said Mrs. Barnaby, when tea was finished. "She is lying down because her doctor told her she ought to. She'll get up when she knows you're here, Aline. She was rather hoping you'd come and see her again."

"Come and admire the studio," said Stephen, impatiently.

He led the way down the corridor to the rear of the house, and Aline braced herself.

The studio was wrong. A single glance told Aline that. Artistically perfect, but never a workshop! There was a divan in exactly the right place. There was a new dais and a polished contrivance with levers for controlling the light. There were hangings and screens and wonderful colours and shining armour! "*Mr. Stephen Barnaby in his studio in Chelsea.*" It was the studio of a man who expected to be interviewed as an artist.

So Stephen would never be anything at all! It was terribly disappointing.

He was going to explain the polished contrivance. She must stop him.

"Stephen!"

"I haven't been able to get a moment for work yet," said Stephen, defensively. He did not look at her. "Felt I ought to get mother's little show going first. And, then, this place is only just finished. Work would have been impossible with people buzzing in and out the whole time. I made a few colour notes in Paris. Meant to go and see Lamente, but there really wasn't time. But once I get going, I'll make people sit up; if you'll go on believing in me, at least." He turned swiftly and took the polished floor between them at a stride. "Aline, if only you'd marry me at the beginning of the—the test, instead of waiting! Without you, I'm——"

He broke off so suddenly that she started. He was peering into her face. She mustn't betray her strange, sudden fear of him.

"What is it, Aline?" he jerked out.

She heard herself telling him what it was.

"I promised I would tell you at once if I ever found myself thinking of another man. I'm awfully sorry, Stephen, but I've come to keep the promise."

"Who is he? *Who* is he? I'll——"

"Stephen!"

Aline was trembling with a deep, wild anger. How dared Stephen take that tone? How *dared* he? How dared he look at her like that and come closer and closer to her and grip the air with his hands as though she had escaped him. . . . The anger passed in a flash. She had hurt him badly; it was an awful thing to inflict pain. It wasn't his fault, she supposed, that he had never quite understood the nature of her feeling for him.

In that lengthening silence Aline realised for the first time that she had played with fire. She had tried to make Stephen find himself, and he had found only his own love for her. He had understood nothing—nothing—nothing. The bitterness of it drove out her lurking fear of him.

"Stephen, I'm so very sorry. But you still have your future; your work."

He stared at her as though he could barely hear her words.

"My future!" he repeated. "What's the good of working now you won't ever marry me? What's the good——?"

"You still look upon love as a sort of competition in which the best man wins," she cut in hopelessly. "I've tried so hard to make you see——"

"It's as good a way of thinking of it as any other," he retorted. The colour was returning to his face. "You're bound to believe that he's a better man than I, or you'd care for me."

"No, no!" Aline retreated to the divan. "He may be better than you or worse, but I am the last to be able to judge—and it's absolutely of no importance. *Can't* you understand that it isn't a question of running a race and winning a prize—myself? You've got to express yourself fully for your own sake, for the sake of the best that's in you—I've got to express myself, too, for my own sake—we've all got to do it."

Stephen had followed her to the divan and thrown himself upon it. She would not let herself shrink away, but his nearness increased her distress.

"Be sensible, Stephen. If Lamente himself suddenly walked into this studio and told me you had furtively painted the greatest picture he'd ever seen, do you think I'd change my mind and beg you to marry me? If there

were no other man for me and no other woman for you, I should still shrink from the idea of being *conferred* upon you."

He looked up at her. His face was so haggard that her heart smote her.

"Yet once you told me that you loved me on trust—for what I might become. Where's that love gone?"

She was silent.

"It never existed," said Stephen, passionately. "I was often afraid it didn't. Love isn't conditional——"

"It was always clear that it wasn't conditional," she interrupted. "I told you I couldn't promise to love you when you'd made good. I tried to be honest with you, Stephen; you must admit that. I did feel just exactly that—a love of what you'll become one day; and I feel it still."

"No," he said, flatly, "you don't. A sort of artistic interest, perhaps, but that's all."

She was silent. She could not parry his thrust. She had used the great name of love in vain, and she was abashed.

"It's because I've slacked, because you're tired of waiting," burst from Stephen with a violence she had never suspected in him. "If I'd done something big—anything—thrown all my money into the sea to make you smile—you'd never have thought about another man! But like a fool I listened to Lamente and the others—and to you—and believed it was only the greatest that comes after years of work that would count with you——"

"It would count—it will. I shall honour you——"

"You'd have loved me—I'd have made you—if I'd not waited. I've let you slip through my fingers."

He was kneeling at her side, his face against her hand. she felt his tears. . . . Poor Stephen, how terribly she had hurt him. . . .

"I could get you back if I only knew," he gasped. "You loved me first; only a little, but first. I'll make that love live again and grow. . . . I'll force it back . . . somehow. . . ."

She wrenched her hand away and rose, shivering uncontrollably. She looked at Stephen's heaving shoulders and tried to speak, but could form no words.

A door slammed somewhere. Aline went to the door

of the studio and opened it. Stephen's mother was coming down the corridor towards her.

Aline closed the door of the studio quickly behind her and walked towards Mrs. Barnaby. As she moved forward she saw herself in a long glass. Just the same, apparently ; golden hair, brown eyes, and the usual amount of colour. It was curious, because she felt so lifeless, but it was very fortunate ! Mrs. Barnaby would notice nothing.

“ Stephen is absorbed in the mechanism of his new easel,” Aline said, “ so I thought I would leave him to it and see if Miss Cave has come downstairs yet.”

“ Yes, she's in the drawing-room,” said Mrs. Barnaby. Aline was conscious of her sharp glance. “ You look rather worn. Have you and Stephen been quarrelling ? ”

Again Aline was impressed by the flash of sexual intuition. In a second of time Stephen's mother had touched the essence of the situation—with the wrong end of the stick, certainly, but she had touched it. It gave Aline a sort of rebellious indifference.

“ Oh yes ! We differ so ; it's inevitable ; but I daresay it's good for us both, don't you ? ”

They had reached the drawing-room door.

“ It depends,” said Mrs. Barnaby, and added in the same breath : “ You know Mrs. Cordant—my brother Christopher's wife ? She's just come.”

Aline did not flinch. She walked steadily into the colourful room and faced Jacintha, seated in a deep chair at Arabella's side.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE LADY WITHOUT MERCY

“ **O** H! Jacintha, do you—I don’t think——” fluttered Miss Arabella. Aline received the impression that the dear, quaint, fussy thing was trying to guard her against Christopher’s wife.

Jacintha Cordant smiled.

“ Oh yes, Araby, Miss Prade and I have met. She was good enough to call, with Stephen. . . . Has your architect been given the rebuilding of the Institute, Miss Prade? Christopher never told me.”

Aline looked quietly down into the deep eyes raised to hers. She had never seen eyes so hard.

“ It hasn’t been finally decided. No, thank you, Mrs. Barnaby, I won’t sit down. I must be off.”

“ Oh, must you? I thought perhaps——”

There was a new note beneath Miss Arabella’s hesitation. Aline’s pulses leapt to it; the hostile composure of Jacintha, the curiosity of Stephen’s mother, shrank immediately to petty annoyances that could neither make nor mar.

“ Miss Cave, when are you coming to my cottage? Shall we go down for Christmas? ” Aline watched the effect of her words—the surprise, the timidity, the hope.

“ *Christmas?* Really, I don’t think—— One likes to be in one’s own home for Christmas, surely? Besides——”

“ You haven’t got a home now, Araby,” remarked Mrs. Barnaby, with affected brutality.

“ My cottage is the most homely place in the world——” coaxed Aline.

“ And very probably your parents like to spend Christmas alone together,” put in Christopher’s wife. “ You’re an only child, aren’t you, Miss Prade? I’ve often thought

only children must feel *de trop* sometimes and resent it a little, except that it's wonderful to see people so devoted to each other after years and years, isn't it ? ”

Miss Arabella's face twitched. Mrs. Barnaby looked sarcastically into space. Aline was wondering why Christopher's wife should desire to taunt a lonely, lost old maid who had not harmed her. Aline looked steadily at the beautiful downcast face. Jacintha seemed absorbed in contemplation of her own languid hands. Aline paid generous tribute to the sweep of lashes, the full red lips, the ivory-perfection of feature, the intensely black hair. A beautiful, proud, impetuous woman who might—or might not—be playing the game. . . .

“ Hadn't you better sit down ? ” suggested Miss Arabella. “ You must be getting tired ; and really, to stand before the fire—a little mannish, I always feel——”

That hint of friendliness had gone ; Miss Arabella was distinctly acid. Jacintha's doing, with her reminder that the marriage of Aline's parents was still an unqualified success ! That deeply resented marriage—the long spite—then the power at last to pay back hurt for hurt—it was such an obvious chain of thought to end in acidity towards the child of that marriage. But what did Jacintha gain ? The knowledge that doubt and distrust could be kept alive by a word. . . .

“ Do you believe,” asked Aline, deliberately, of the room at large, “ that everyone has a dominant desire ? ”

Even Jacintha started, but she was the first to recover herself. She lifted her sombre gaze to Aline.

“ My grandfather believed it,” she answered. “ And he knew men—and women.”

Arabella made an unhappy little sound. Mrs. Barnaby laughed sharply. Aline crossed the room and sat by her side, but she addressed herself to the gaunt lady by the fire.

“ Mrs. Cordant's grandfather was your Uncle Gregory, wasn't he, Miss Cave ? Stephen's told me about him. Of course the dominant desire idea was very common in his day, but lately auto-suggestion has rather questioned it, don't you think ? ”

“ I—— Has it ? ” stammered Arabella.

Aline cheered herself on.

“ I met someone the other day who rather held to it,” she continued, “ and that made me realise that I didn't.”

"I do," came from Stephen's mother. Aline noticed that she was staring at Jacintha and that Miss Arabella was staring at Stephen's mother. Jacintha was languid again, her lips curving remotely into a sneer.

"But, Mrs. Barnaby, how can one know whether a desire is dominant or not?"

It was Jacintha who answered.

"By knowing that it's been with one for years and years and years; by knowing that one has brooded over it and weighed it and watched it fulfil itself, first in dreams, then in reality—perhaps."

The rich voice swelled and ceased. Jacintha had not raised her eyes, but from Miss Arabella there came again that little stricken sound, and from Stephen's mother a nervous jerk of the hand.

"But how does one know," persisted Aline, "that one wasn't brooding over a desire that was dead?"

Again she had flicked Jacintha into active defence. The black eyes glittered watchfully, though the full lips were indulgent.

"My dear child—oh, Miss Prade, I'm sorry! But that really did sound so extremely young! Didn't it, Arabella?"

Miss Arabella's lips trembled painfully; she made no reply.

"And you make yourself sound extremely old, Jacintha," said Mrs. Barnaby, with an unpleasant laugh. "As a matter of fact, you and Aline are both babes. What's the difference, then, Aline, between being dominated by a real desire and the ghost of one, if you don't know it's a ghost?"

"No difference, at the time! But afterwards, if you find you've only been haunted by a memory—why, you just lay the ghost and walk out into the world! And then you know certainly and surely that you've been deceiving yourself."

"Why?"

"Because you feel how you've grown! Everything feels new, and yet you understand things better than before. Your mind doesn't stay the same for years on end; your hopes and fears don't remain the same—then why should your loves and your hates?" Aline flung a smile at Miss Arabella and spoke straight to her, ignoring the others.

"You desire things at twenty-seven that you don't really go on desiring for the next thirty years. If you were offered them at fifty-seven you wouldn't know what on earth to do with them! So what has been dominating you? *Nothing!*"

The pale eyes fixed upon hers gave Aline a sense of elation. The vague hands appealed. . . .

"You agree with me, Miss Cave?"

"No. That is, I don't—of course, it would be very pleasant to think——"

"I'd like to convert you," challenged Aline.

She heard Mrs. Barnaby draw a quick breath. Aline held the gaze of the pale eyes, indifferent to everything else.

"Do let me! You shall tell me in Devonshire what your dominant desire is, and I'll smash it to little bits!"

The pale eyes blinked, the hands shook pathetically. Mrs. Barnaby was sitting very still. If only, *only* Jacintha would keep out of it! Miss Arabella was murmuring something about the wrong time of year for Devonshire, and so quiet—and she really wanted to see a little of London, she'd never been able to go about much before——

Aline threw herself back into the lists.

"Oh, Miss Cave, I'd love to show you London! Let's go and stay at a nice noisy hotel and dance between the courses at supper and be frivolous! We'll never be in before two in the morning. . . ."

Mrs. Barnaby was laughing uneasily. Jacintha was pretending to stifle a yawn. Aline, unheeding, spoke to the bewildered eyes and shifting hands and all the tired little ways of the woman who believed she believed in revenge.

"The Parnassus, Miss Cave? They have jolly times there at Christmas. I'll book rooms to-day—for next Tuesday, shall I say? And we'll go to the Midnight Follies——"

Jacintha stirred. Aline sensed danger. If only she could be held off a moment longer. . . .

"You mustn't go unescorted," said Jacintha. "Get Sir Rowland to go with you. He's an old friend of Arabella's, you know, Miss Prade."

Arabella quivered and shut her mouth. She looked as though she were waking up.

"Rather nice to meet him again," the rich, cruel voice drawled on. "I hear he and Turley are business rivals. Turley himself mentioned it to me. All the pleasanter to have some kind of social bond. Do go to the Parnassus for Christmas, Araby, and let Miss Prade and her father cure you of your dominant desire."

Aline leant back in her chair. The light had gone from the pale, poor eyes that she still held with her own. Miss Arabella's lips were folded to a thin line; a hard colour burnt upon her cheeks.

Jacintha had won, it seemed.

"I think Miss Prade has been joking," said Arabella, distantly. "I really don't fancy that hotel life——" She looked at her sister for guidance, but Mrs. Barnaby was frowning at the fire.

"Indeed I wasn't joking," said Aline, gently. She felt very tired. "I shall go to the Parnassus on Tuesday and come here on the way, to see if I can't persuade you to accompany me. . . . Now I must really be off. I'm afraid I've tired everybody out, but only children always talk too much. . . . Good-bye, Miss Cave."

"I have an appointment with a dressmaker on Tuesday," said Miss Arabella, unexpectedly.

"I won't come before tea-time," said Aline, swiftly.

"Oh, really, I don't think——"

Aline found Stephen's mother following her from the room.

"You're quite a sound psychologist, Aline," said Mrs. Barnaby, with the airiness that suited her so ill. "Drop in on Tuesday; Arabella will have changed her mind a dozen times by then, and it's just possible she'll be in a state of wanting to go."

"She mustn't go on hating my father," said Aline, simply. "It's bad for her."

"And for him," hinted Mrs. Barnaby, drily. "Araby and Turley together—— Don't tell me you don't know of that little development."

"I know. Of course, I want daddy to be made safe; but it isn't the same kind of wish as the wish to see her—free."

Aline found Mrs. Barnaby's shrug hard to endure.

"I'll just say good-bye to Stephen. I expect he's still in the studio."

"Probably. . . . Has Christopher told you the *entire* family history, Aline?"

Aline felt the blood rush to her face. She said nothing, but Mrs. Barnaby went on as though she had received assent.

"In that case, I don't wonder at Jacintha weighing in against you. And you've left her in possession of the field!"

"I shall return to battle on Tuesday," retorted Aline, trying to speak lightly.

"Oh, well. . . . It's no affair of mine. I never did pretend to be disinterested about anything. I only wish you luck with Araby, because Jacintha is—Jacintha. More—and less—a Blenkiron than any of us. Well—I'll say the 'phone's out of order if Jacintha gets Arabella to ring Turley to-day. But that won't prevent her writing."

Aline turned away. She felt horribly futile. She wondered whether Mrs. Barnaby would tell Stephen that it was Christopher—somehow Aline thought not.

She pushed open the studio door. Perhaps it was unwise to go back to Stephen, but then it would be so unfriendly to leave him with his disappointment in that elaborate studio where one could do everything but work.

He was sprawling in a chair, his head in his hands, in the traditional manner of the rejected lover. It would have been easy to laugh, thought Aline, and very stupidly cruel. His love was not despicable because he could only think of it in terms of knights and ladies. And this stereotyped formula of grief was better to deal with than the mood in which she had left him.

"Dear Stephen——"

He rose. For a moment he said nothing. Then he put out his hand. She did not quite like the gesture, but her chief concern was to save his feelings. She put her hand in his. He raised it to his lips with a gravity that galled her.

"Aline, whatever I may feel—I hope I am great enough to wish you every happiness."

It was wrong, as wrong as the studio. "*How a gentleman should take his congé.*" She blamed herself for being insanely uncharitable. Christopher made her uncharitable to every man who fell below his standard.

"Every happiness," he repeated.

"Thank you, Stephen," she said, a little breathlessly. There was danger in that phrase.

"Are you going to marry him soon, Aline?"

"No," said Aline, sharply.

"May I not know his name? Very well. I can take my dismissal easily enough as far as you and he are concerned."

Something in his voice made her withdraw her hand abruptly.

"You say you are not going to marry soon?" he asked.

"Not soon," she repeated. "Perhaps—probably—almost certainly, never at all."

"But surely—has he not asked you to marry him?"

"I promised I would tell you the moment that I began to think about another man."

There was a difficult silence.

"Good-bye, Stephen."

He stood still, watching her go. At the door she looked back. The conventional rejected lover had disappeared. Stephen's head was held back, his eyes were hungry, his fingers curved. . . . She remembered that he had said that he would force back her love for him. "*If I'd thrown all my money into the sea to make you smile—*"

She almost ran down the corridor and out of the house.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE YEARS BETWEEN

A WEEK later Aline looked back upon that day of dissatisfactions and tossed it a laugh. For Miss Arabella had come to the Parnassus.

It had been surprisingly easy after the first half hour, which had been distinctly trying. Miss Arabella, sitting alone over the fire in Mrs. Barnaby's drawing-room, thought it very kind of Miss Prade to take so much trouble, but really it was quite out of the question. It wasn't as though Miss Prade and Miss Arabella were even distant relatives. Quite the contrary, in fact. And—and there were difficulties in the way of a friendship—Miss Arabella failed to specify the difficulties, but her hands and face twitched and her eyes shifted back to the fire.

Aline had brushed aside the difficulties. She had put forth all her vitality and forced a little life upon the withered, wistful soul. And, amazingly, Miss Arabella had collapsed and wept and supposed that even if she felt like going to spend Christmas anywhere, with anyone, Bissett, her maid, wouldn't hear of it. Bissett would never pack under a clear three days. Bissett was dreadful. Besides, Bissett was out.

"I am not afraid of Bissett," bubbled Aline. "We'll share a maid, and you can buy all your clothes as you need them. Tell me where your furs and hat are and I'll get them before Bissett comes back. . . . Here's your 'hankie.' Don't cry any more. We're going to have *fun*."

So here they were at the Parnassus, and they were having fun. At least Aline was, and Miss Arabella was having something bewilderingly like it. Aline studied her with delight. Christopher wouldn't know her, she decided.

Miss Arabella was turning the leaves of an illustrated sporting and social weekly. Judging by the blankness of her gaze, it presented itself to her as an essay on an abstruse problem. Aline leant forward and pulled it gently away.

"Talk to me a little," she demanded, gaily. "You're getting so absorbed in the gay life that you're simply pushing me into the background."

"What an idea!" protested Arabella, with the deliberate old-maidishness which Aline had enjoyed from the first. She added: "It's all very—funny. I was frightened when you took me to that hair-dresser's yesterday. I thought they would let me see that they were laughing at me, but they didn't. You know, Aline, you may say what you like, but I don't think the place was quite—nice. It was quiet, certainly, but——"

"But what?" prompted Aline, controlling her amusement.

"Scented," whispered Miss Arabella. She shook her head profoundly.

"Scent isn't always a sign of iniquity," said Aline, solemnly. "I use a little scent, you know. So must you."

"Lavender-water——"

"Nothing of the kind. With that brown crêpe dress, for instance, you must use a wallflower scent. I'll get you some."

Miss Arabella shivered, but her eyes were bright.

"When you made me buy that gown I nearly cried—I was so pleased. . . ." she said. "It's funny, because I thought it would all be very tiring; but it isn't."

"It's restful?" suggested Aline.

"Yes, it is. That's why it's so funny."

"It isn't really funny." Aline stroked the thin hand. "Staying in this hotel and knocking about the shops and theatres rests you because it helps you to run away from yourself."

Arabella started.

"Is it? Does it? I can't always understand what you say. Why should I want to—yes, it does help me to run away from myself."

"And the running is good while it lasts, but it only lasts as long as you need it, dear Miss Arabella. Then you find that you're running in a circle, and you run back to yourself—only it's a new self that's been aired and dusted."

Arabella felt for the shawl that was no longer upon her shoulders. Then, with a deliberation that made Aline want to scream, she rose and surveyed herself in a long mirror.

Aline looked over her shoulder.

Miss Arabella's hair had been bleached from iron-grey streaked with brown to a soft and silky white. It was dressed high, with a comb of jet, and the arresting contrast gave light and life to Miss Arabella's eyes. The masseuse, the manicurist, the corsetière, had all laid hands upon their victim, and the result was a graceful woman, gowned in subtle greys and violets and the frailest of lace.

"I have never before worn *any* but black or brown shoes," said Miss Arabella, in a sort of ecstasy. "Black in winter, brown in summer."

Aline grimaced at her in the glass.

"Bissett will have a stroke," continued Miss Arabella, with relish. "I think, Aline, I shall dismiss her. You could telephone to her for me, couldn't you, from here? I needn't see her again. Then I could have someone more like your Vance; someone who could help me choose things The only thing is——"

"What, dear?"

"It would cost a great deal to be dressed like this—always. And Bissett is so much less expensive than Vance. I don't think I could afford——"

Miss Arabella turned from the glass, and again Aline saw the old furtiveness in her eyes.

"You are a wealthy woman, Miss Arabella," she said, quietly.

"In a way, yes. But—I can't explain—my money—just for the time being I may have to be a little careful. I—really, it's very difficult to explain, especially to you——"

Aline was remembering the one point upon which Miss Arabella had been firm. "We must each pay for ourselves. I can't be your guest and—and I can't very well ask you to be mine." Aline had agreed, carelessly, taking it for granted that Miss Arabella's alliance with her brother against Prade and Watkins had been postponed. "She wouldn't be friends with me if she were helping to harm daddy," Aline had decided. Now—she wondered.

She looked at the clock. It was exactly five.

"In a few seconds," announced Aline, "the page will knock at this door."

The knock followed the word. The page entered and handed Aline a card.

"Yes," said Aline, "in here, please." She turned to Arabella.

"You had a shock when we went to that revue last night," she said, "and you wished you hadn't come. But very soon you were very glad you had come."

"If I said so, I don't think it's very kind of you to remind me of it," protested Arabella.

"I had to. It's going to be the same now. A much bigger shock is coming. Do you feel brave?"

"No. Oh, what is going to happen?"

"Nothing," said Aline. "Nothing has happened since we came here, only it will seem something at first, as the hotel and the theatres and the hair-dresser have all seemed something."

The door opened.

"Hullo, Aline——"

Sir Rowland stopped on the threshold, bowed awkwardly, and muttered an apology.

From the corner of her eye Aline was watching Arabella. Arabella was singularly unflustered. In that fraction of a second there flashed into Aline's brain the knowledge that Arabella was positively awaiting an introduction. Aline looked at her father. He too was hovering.

"Miss Cave," said Aline, with a demureness that Arabella herself would have used thirty years ago, "may I introduce my father?"

Miss Arabella went quite rigid. Then her hand wandered out and up, as though in search of something, and finally touched the jet comb in her hair. Apparently the feel of it reassured her, for her voice, when she spoke, was no unsteadier than usual.

"Sir Rowland Prade and I have met before, but it's so long ago——"

Aline regarded her father. He was bowing again.

"The introduction was quite unnecessary, my dear Aline. Miss Cave and I, if I may say so, are old friends."

"I would have known you at once," insisted Miss Arabella, defiantly, "but the light——"

"Quite so!" said Sir Rowland. "Exactly! The light! You will not think me discourteous when I say that for the moment I myself was not absolutely sure. But only for the moment, of course."

Aline feared there would be more of it. She cut in with a laugh—

"Sit down, Daddy. Aren't you relieved to find that I am in such safe hands? You must thank Miss Cave for looking after me."

Sir Rowland swallowed.

"Ah, yes!" he exclaimed. "Most kind of you, I am sure. A young madcap! One never knows what she will do next."

"The kindness has been all on the side of your daughter," said Arabella primly. "In fact——"

"Ah!" said Sir Rowland. "Very glad to hear it if she really has."

The conversation, thought Aline, was becoming rather dreadful. She wanted it to be as dreadful as possible.

"Miss Cave is taking a rest-cure, Daddy," she volunteered.

"Ah! Very good idea, too, if I may say so. Always wanted to do that myself, but never managed to fit it in."

Arabella was explaining that it could hardly be called a rest-cure. Aline was tingling with the knowledge that for sheer vapidity her father could not at that moment be beaten. He was stroking the back of his head, while he gave an unnerving attention to Arabella's platitudes. Aline rang the bell for tea.

"Tea for two," she ordered, "and a siphon of soda. . . . We've got some quite good brandy, Daddy. We had some last night. We can thoroughly recommend it."

Arabella was understood to stammer that Aline might have taken brandy, but she herself certainly had not.

"Of course not! And I don't want any either, Aline!" said Sir Rowland, at the height of discomfort.

"He's only saying that out of politeness, Miss Cave," lied Aline unblushingly. "If he doesn't have a brandy at tea-time he can never eat any dinner, and the doctor told him to take care of himself."

Sir Rowland, who had never in his life taken brandy in the afternoon, allowed himself to be pushed towards the sideboard. As he poured out his brandy his ears rose to

the points Aline recognised as symptoms of violent but repressed curiosity.

"Do you mind if my father smokes while we're having tea?" she asked Arabella, as she handed her father a box of cigarettes. "He's never really comfortable unless he can smoke, are you, Daddy?"

"Of course I am!" protested Sir Rowland. "Look here, Aline! . . . Oh, well, if Miss Cave is sure she does not mind? . . . Thank you."

Aline poured out tea while her father attended assiduously to the wants of Arabella, in the intervals consuming the wholly superfluous brandy and soda. Aline drew him into politics and kept him there while Arabella, thinking herself unobserved, studied his wrinkles and thinning hair and elderly trimness. Aline unscrupulously intimated that Miss Cave was interested in the possibility of a General Election, and herself slipped from the room.

She gave them five minutes, in which she knew that her father would assure Arabella that he was surprised to find her so young-looking. When she came back, Sir Rowland was in the process of ushering himself out. She noted that the embarrassment was now entirely on the side of her father. Arabella was serene in spite of the faintest flush, and almost startlingly confident.

"This has been a very pleasant meeting, Sir Rowland," she said, giving her hand.

Aline observed the easy use of the title. There was no undue stressing of the "Sir." For better or worse he had accomplished his daughter's purpose, and Aline, as she watched him hurry down the corridor to the lift, blew him a repentant kiss.

Arabella, sitting with the Blenkiron immobility, was deep in thought.

"What do you think of him?" asked Aline.

"Oh!" said Arabella.

"He's rather an old pet, isn't he? Eccentric, you know, but on the whole quite interesting. He always expects election——"

"I don't know anything about politics," said Miss Arabella, rousing herself. "Does—does your mother?"

"Only what he's made her read up. They'd never have anything to talk about if she didn't keep pace with him. He has no other interests, you see, beside his

business, which is worse to understand than an election, on the whole."

Arabella's eyes were downcast. Her line of vision led to a mass of cigarette-ash beside the chair in which Sir Rowland had sat.

"He does that all over the place," said Aline lightly. "In the drawing-room—in mother's little room—everywhere. It treads into the carpets, and if you put your head on the cushions you'll probably get some in your hair." She moved about the room drawing the ash-trays out of the places in which she had concealed them.

"Doesn't brandy smell beastly," she added. "Mother has to pretend to like it, poor dear!"

"Really?" Miss Arabella was much taken aback. "I should not have thought—of course, thirty years is a long time."

"Yes," said Aline. "Long enough for both of you to have changed completely. It is true, isn't it?"

"What is true?"

"That you don't really go on wanting a thing for thirty years! That if you could have *now* what you desired most in the world when you were twenty-seven, you wouldn't know what to do with it?"

Miss Arabella caught her breath.

"One doesn't realise the changes——" She tried to recover herself. "From the first, I guessed that you knew all about me and—and your father. And I must say I think in the circumstances it was extremely indelicate——"

"Darling!" cried Aline, with a gust of laughter.

Miss Arabella quivered.

"Well, let me say, extremely *modern* of you to bring about a meeting without preparing either of us."

"But why ever not?" asked Aline innocently. "I knew all along he and you would meet again, just as any two old friends might who had lost touch. What preparation was needed? You were most awfully sweet to him, and he tried to be pleasant to you. I thought you got on very well, as well as anyone ever gets on with Daddy."

"He was very pleasant indeed," agreed Miss Arabella, helplessly, "though I don't think we got on *very* well. Politics are so—— And, of course, we were conscious of the thirty years between to-day and—the past."

"There is no bridge, is there?" said Aline clearly.

"Nothing that was then between you has survived. And the dearest thing of all is your old desire to be his wife."

Miss Arabella swayed a little. Her lips moved.

"You wouldn't like to have been married to him for the last thirty years, would you?" pressed Aline.

"I——"

"Your desire to pay him back for jilting you didn't last very long. As you changed, you came not to care. You only thought you were still sore and angry. There have always been things you wanted, but marriage with Daddy was only one of them for a very, very short time. I'll tell you—you'd much rather have a daughter than a husband."

Miss Arabella was paper-white.

"The Little 'Un, my mother, cares more for Daddy than for me," said Aline. "She's a little beloved and it doesn't hurt me, but I *know*. P'raps I'd—love like that, too. But *you* care for young people, for girls like me; you're interested and sympathetic and clever with them. . . . Oh yes, you are! Look how splendidly you manage me! Well—here we are, you and I, we're happy together chiefly because you've found your real desire. Me."

Miss Arabella drew a handkerchief across her lips.

"You've had a lonely life," went on Aline, relentlessly. "Very likely I'm going to have one, too. Let you and I be friends, then."

"Shake!"

She put out her hand. Miss Arabella seized it with both hers, held it fiercely, then dropped it.

"I can't," she wailed. "I've been wicked. I've——"

"Not wicked; mistaken."

"No. I began to suspect I was mistaken some time ago. But, you see, my uncle—Mr. Blenkiron——"

"I know about him. He tempted you."

Miss Arabella jerked forward in her chair.

"You know that too? Miriam told you!"

"I know that, too," evaded Aline. "But that's all over now. Whatever happened, you didn't kill Mr. Blenkiron. Your conscious self wouldn't have let you, because it knew better than you did. It knew Mr. Blenkiron was wrong when he spoke to you of your dominant desire. Don't tremble so. Don't cry."

"It's all so—funny, Aline. And I'm afraid I——"

"Yes?"

"I'm afraid I *have* been wicked. Aline, dear, you can use the telephone, can't you? Could you ring up Turley—my brother in the City?"

Aline, kneeling by the armchair, stiffened.

"Yes, I will ring him up at once."

"Ask him to come and see me *quickly*. . . . At once." Slowly Aline rose.

"I have been *wicked*," Miss Arabella was repeating, "but I'm quite sure I shall be able to put it right."

Aline's heart was beating heavily. She left the room and went down to the lounge. Her thoughts were racing. If Miss Arabella had promised to join financial forces with her brother, there was but the slenderest chance that there would be a way of retreat. Turley Cave would have seized his moment.

She found his number, gave him Miss Arabella's message, and was assured he would be round in ten minutes.

She thought his voice too smooth, and shivered as she replaced the receiver. Then, on an impulse, she rang up her home.

"Oh, daddy! It's you? . . . Sorry I landed you in for that fool tea-party, but I had my reasons . . . You old Trojan! . . . I say, how are things going? . . . Oh dear . . . Shall I come home? . . . Very well. I'll ring you every day. Cheer up as much as you can, won't you . . . Bless you! 'Bye."

Aline's face was grave as she went back to Miss Arabella.

"Now we'll see if I can practise what I preached to Stephen," she said grimly to herself. "Work for work's sake. . . . Am I really and truly glad I've cured Miss Arabella, or did I only want to stop her harming us all? Because it's ten to one that if that was *my* dominant desire, it's failed."

CHAPTER XXXIV

A QUESTION OF MONEY

AN hour later Aline went back to the sitting-room. She found Miss Arabella still sitting by the fire. Her hands were unsteady, but there was a hardness in her eyes that faintly alarmed Aline. Things, evidently, had gone wrong, and it was more natural for Miss Arabella to weep when things went wrong.

"My brother has been to see me," said Arabella. "I want to tell you everything he said to me. I think I can understand what he said now—and I'll tell you while I still do understand it. No, go and sit over there. Don't touch me. You see, I've harmed you. I wanted to help Turley against your father, because—well, Turley says he can't do anything about the money. He said he would if he could, which isn't true, but he can't. He has done something with the money I assigned to him. He's paid it over or made a deposit of it. He can't give it me back. He doesn't want to. He *won't* give it me back."

Aline closed her eyes, waiting for the story to tumble out in its own way. Explanations weren't much good, now. . . . To her surprise they came with extraordinary clarity.

"My brother's Company is called Western Coalfields," said Arabella. "It seems strange. . . . Do you know what undercutting means?"

"Yes, I think so, it means——"

"I don't want to know," interrupted Arabella. "Turley has been undercutting your father's firm and he—your father, I mean—has been undercutting Turley's firm. Does that sound sensible?—it is what Turley said."

"Quite sensible," said Aline. It seemed to her faintly paradoxical, but she knew that it was not the main point.

"They've both got into such difficulties that they must

have the—he wrote it down—wait a minute—the Trans-Continental, Limited, contract.”

“I know. I’ve heard Daddy speak of it,” said Aline, dully. “I thought it was his contract.”

“Turley was going to get it this time,” said Arabella. “But they wanted to know—they insisted on being shown—that he could finance it. It seems unwarrantable interference in his affairs. And he couldn’t prove to them that he could finance it until he had my money. And now he can. They’ve asked your father to prove that he can finance it and he can’t, so Turley will get the contract and your father will be ruined because he won’t have the contract. And as I understand from Turley, it is all my fault.”

There was a pause.

“I don’t think there is any need to look at it like that,” said Aline, watching her. “Supposing you hadn’t lent your brother any money. From what you have just told me it looks as if your brother would have been ruined if he hadn’t got the contract. It isn’t exactly a fault to help your own brother.”

“I didn’t lend it to help him,” said Arabella. “I did it to hurt your father—before I had seen him—after I had seen that wife of Christopher’s whom I disliked from the moment when she behaved in that appalling way at poor Uncle Gregory’s funeral. I hate her, Aline. She made me think you were trying to make friends with me—on your father’s instructions—to prevent my money being used against him.”

“I see,” said Aline, with difficulty. “I think one should be very sorry for Mrs. Cordant. She is—embittered.”

“It was after you’d left Miriam’s house that day—when you suddenly talked about dominant desires. She stayed on and told me about Turley’s rivalry with your father. Turley had spoken to me about it before, but Jacintha put it so—so——”

“It doesn’t matter, dear Miss Araby.”

“I can’t *think* what Turley was about to confide so much in her,” cried Miss Araby. “Perhaps she made him tell her, just as she made me help him. No, she didn’t exactly make me; she left me wanting to——”

“Please don’t!”

There was a miserable silence. Then—

"There was something else Turley said this afternoon," volunteered Miss Arabella. "He said he was going to sell shares in Prade and Watkins."

"Are you sure you've got that right?" asked Aline. "It seems unlikely that he has any shares. Father wouldn't sell them to him."

"Then perhaps he must have said that he would buy shares. It was either buy or sell. And whichever it was, I'm sure it was something horrible. It was the way he said it. He was talking more to himself than to me; he leered at himself, not at me. It was very unnerving."

Aline waited. Arabella had no more to say. There was a silence, and then in a queer, dry voice Arabella asked:

"What am I to do?"

"Nothing," said Aline. "There is nothing to be done. Don't distress yourself so terribly. I think it was splendid of you to admit that you meant to hurt Daddy. I was hoping you would tell me. I—may come closer to you now, mayn't I?"

"I am going to tell your father what I have done. . . . It's just as if Uncle Gregory had been right." As Aline put her arms round Miss Arabella's frail body the tears came. Aline soothed her, reflecting that Jacintha seemed to make Gregory Blenkiron right at every step she took. It was very difficult to think clearly about Jacintha. It was fatally easy to accuse herself of personal bias. But there was the fact to be faced that Jacintha, at the request of Turley Cave or not, had ranged herself on his side and worked with him for the downfall of the Prades.

Aline, chafing Miss Arabella's cold hands, tried to put herself in Jacintha's place and failed.

Miss Arabella refused to go anywhere that night, and Aline acquiesced in her taking a sleeping-draught. She herself did not sleep until far into the night, and then she dreamt of Gregory Blenkiron, a fantastically old and malevolent man who told her she was an extremely unsound psychologist.

She was called from breakfast on the following morning by a telephone message from her mother. Miss Arabella always breakfasted in bed.

"Aline."

It was a bad sign when her mother used her name.

"Speaking, Little 'Un."

"Do you remember those War Bonds that Uncle Timothy gave you? They were for two thousand pounds, weren't they?"

"Yes. Why——"

"Daddy's gone to the City. I made him take my jewellery with him. He wants every penny he can lay hands on, and I thought——"

"The bonds are at the bank, Little 'Un. What must I do?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Go and be nice to the bank-manager. Try and get him to give you cash or something that your father can turn into cash. He said he probably wouldn't be at his office. Give it to Mr. Spriggs."

"Wouldn't you like me to be with you, Little 'Un?"

"I'll ring up if I want you, darling, thanks. I'm going out now. On—business."

"You have had bad news about your father," said Arabella, as Aline entered her room.

"I have had no news about him directly, except that he would like some money, and I'm going to the bank. I have some War Bonds that Uncle gave me."

Miss Arabella, haggard and heavy-eyed in the morning light, pushed aside her breakfast-tray. Aline saw that she had eaten nothing.

"I have three hundred pounds in the bank, Aline. Take that too. It's not Blenkiron money. You see, I have a very tiny income of my own. I used it as pin-money while I lived at Grosvenor Square. Uncle Gregory didn't make any of us an allowance, you know. He just provided us with—well——"

"Board and lodging?"

"Yes, I suppose one might put it like that, though it does sound rather—— But my own money wasn't enough for me to do anything very much on, and so I lived very, very quietly, and somehow I saved quite a lot. In fact, I hadn't touched a penny of the—the legacy when Turley——" Her voice broke.

"There's no need for you to lend us the money," Aline assured her. "Father's a wonderful man at business, you know, although you wouldn't think so to talk to him. No, I won't give you your cheque-book. Eat your toast."

Aline was nice to the bank-manager, who put her in a taxi, the bonds in her hand. Mr. Spriggs, the managing clerk, told her that her father was out, looked at the bonds, made her sign a document which he wrote out, then implied that the interview was at an end.

"How are things going?" demanded Aline.

Mr. Spriggs contemplated her over his spectacles.

"It would take a wiser man than myself to answer that question, Miss Prade. For myself, an association of over twenty years with Sir Rowland has given me confidence that no man could handle any given situation better."

"Idiot!" thought Aline, but aloud she said: "Thank you, Mr. Spriggs. It is very comforting to us to know that my father has such a loyal lieutenant."

She went from the offices of Prade and Watkins across Throgmorton Street into Draper's Court. She had remembered the existence of a very pleasant young man, insignificantly named Williams, who had paid her marked attentions during the previous summer. As she waited in his outer office she wondered whether she would learn typewriting if the crash came, or try to get work at an Art Agency. She studied the back of the diligent typist who had told her Mr. Williams would be disengaged shortly. The typist wore serge and a darkish blouse—dark enough not to look soiled after a few days' wear. Very sensible.

Aline moved sharply on her hard chair, and her fur coat fell aside; she was wearing her favourite creamy-white—a little straight gown of fine cloth that, in an office, would soil in an hour. . . .

"Will you please come this way, madam?"

Young Mr. Williams was very surprised to see her and a trifle uneasy. His uneasiness increased at her first words.

"I've come to ask you a favour."

Mr. Williams muttered something about anything he could do.

"I want to know what's happening to my father's firm. I can't ask him because he's much too worried to tell me. And I don't understand anything at all about these things."

"Well, it's—I hardly know—you see, I'm afraid you'd hardly follow if I were to explain—and I couldn't be sure that I was giving you the right facts," faltered Williams.

"Try me," said Aline, and flashed him a smile.

"Well, there's been a bear raid on Prade and Watkins."

"By Western Coalfields?"

"Jove! You know——"

"I know what Western Coalfields are, but I don't know what a 'bear raid' is."

"Well—it's said that your father's firm has lost the big contract it was depending on."

"Trans-Continental, Limited," nodded Aline.

"So people are not anxious to buy shares in your father's company—in fact, they want to sell them. That means the price drops."

"Yes," said Aline. "That's easy enough."

"On top of that, Turley Cave is selling your father's shares."

"How did he get them?"

"He hasn't got them—at least, I don't suppose he has. He just goes on selling them, and when the price has gone low enough he will buy them and hand them to the people to whom he sold them."

"I see. He sells them first and buys them afterwards."

"Quite so," agreed Williams. "It is practically certain that Western Coalfields have got the contract. Prade and Watkins were at eighteen-and-sixpence yesterday morning. Last night they were down to twelve shillings; they've already begun to drop again this morning. I'm afraid unless the buyers step in they'll drop to zero."

Aline was thinking quickly and subtly.

"I believe my father is going to buy," she said, tentatively.

"He might be," said Williams. "It wouldn't do him much good, I imagine. Still, he might do it out of pride. It's the contract that really matters, you see."

Aline rose and gave him her hand.

"Thank you very much," she said. "You all look fearfully busy; I'm going to run off. It was ever so kind of you to explain things to me."

"You can follow it quite clearly yourself, you know, if you look in the paper," said Williams, in the doorway. "Remember that the normal price is eighteen-and-six for a pound share; but, really, I wouldn't worry about it if I were you."

Aline was not going to worry about it. She was worrying about Arabella.

"If father is ruined, he is still father," she mused, in the taxi that took her back to the hotel. "But if father is ruined, I don't quite know what that poor old thing will do to herself. Dear, oh dear! She's much more of a responsibility than Mrs. Byker's baby! At any rate I know now that I chiefly wanted to cure her of that dominant-desire nonsense for her own sake. And I did it. I didn't fail there."

Miss Arabella was waiting in the sitting-room and demanded a full account of her doings. Aline tossed her hat on to the floor, ran her fingers wearily through her hair, and explained as clearly as she could.

"Does it mean that your father will have to pay the difference between eighteen-and-sixpence and twelve shillings?" asked Miss Arabella. "I expect there were thousands and thousands of shares."

"I don't know exactly what it does mean," said Aline. "Though it seems to be bad when the price goes down and good when it goes up. Now, look here, we're going shopping as though everything were as usual——"

"No," said Miss Arabella, stubbornly. "I shall sit here and—and think."

Aline bought the noon edition of the evening paper. After a little difficulty she found Prade and Watkins. An involuntary exclamation broke from her.

"Four and sixpence!" she said.

"Four and sixpence!" echoed Miss Arabella, hoarsely.

"I must telephone my mother," said Aline. "Don't go out of the room. I'll be back."

It seemed an age before she heard her mother's voice. She asked tensely—

"What's going on, Little 'Un?"

"I don't know for certain," answered Lady Margaret, tremulously. "I rang Roly up just now; he couldn't speak to me, but someone told him. He sent a message that everything was O K and I was not to worry."

"Is it any good our going to the City, Little 'Un?"

"No. I suggested that I should come, but he told me to stay here until he came home, when everything would be all right."

"He was bluffing, Little 'Un. You'd better know now. I had a chat with young Williams, after I'd given the money to Mr. Spriggs. He tried to let me down lightly, but he intimated that things were pretty bad."

"I don't agree with him," came indomitably over the wire. A faint ping announced that Lady Margaret had rung off.

Aline turned from the telephone to find Miss Arabella at her elbow. Miss Arabella's face was as grey as her gown and her eyes were wide and staring.

"Mother doesn't know anything," Aline told her hastily. "But I think, if you don't mind, I shall have to go round this afternoon—when father comes back from the City."

"I shall come with you," said Miss Arabella. "I wish to see your mother and tell her what I have done. I would go to her in sackcloth and confess my sin."

Aline was very nearly frightened. She toyed with the idea of sending for a doctor. There were sedatives for old ladies whose nervous systems were badly jangled.

"Let's talk about it after lunch," she said. "We must both keep as clear-headed as we can."

"I am going to your mother, Aline," said Miss Arabella, and laughed.

"After lunch," said Aline, drawing her towards the staircase. The lounge was full, and one or two people were staring.

"You think I'm going mad," said Arabella, loudly. "But you are so young, you think I must be mad whenever I do what I want to do. You do think I'm mad, don't you?"

"No. I think you are a little unstrung, certainly, but then, so am I. Come upstairs. We'll have lunch served in our own room, and if you will eat lunch properly, I won't even believe that you are unstrung."

Aline expected a protest to the effect that it would be impossible for her to take food; but Miss Arabella did not protest. She let herself be led back to their own quarters and presently ate her lunch "properly." She said very little.

Aline contrived delays until three o'clock, and then, after a glance at Miss Arabella's grimly-set lips, telephoned to her mother that they were starting for Kensington at once.

"Miss Cave coming here? Why? What for?" demanded Lady Margaret, on a staccato note.

"She'll tell you herself. Be kind to her, Little 'Un. You see, though from our personal point of view I've done no good by making friends with her, in another sense I've succeeded—I've won all along the line as it were. She's awfully unhappy."

"Indeed! She must enjoy your friendship!" commented Lady Margaret, drily. "Very well. I can't refuse to see her, of course."

It would be an ordeal from which she would have saved her mother if she could, Aline reflected—but it was undeniable that the need of Arabella Cave was very great.

CHAPTER XXXV

PICCALILLI

ALINE eyed Miss Arabella anxiously as they entered the little Queen Anne house. Agitation or inertia Aline could have battled with, but this stony restraint was breaking her nerve. Miss Arabella entered the Prade drawing-room like a woman in a dream. She walked into the middle of the room and stopped there, as though a wire had jerked her to a halt.

The Little 'Un, Aline could see, was impressed by the anguish in the pale eyes that stared into her own. She put out a generous hand, but before Miss Arabella could draw back, Aline seized the rose-leaf fingers and held them lovingly.

"Little 'Un, Miss Cave is distressing herself frantically because she believes that the trouble in the City has been caused through her lending money to her brother. We don't infer that she lent the money out of unfriendliness to us, do we?"

"Oh! Oh no!" murmured Lady Margaret. "Of course not. It's annoying when social and business relations clash, but it's quite unavoidable. Please sit down, Miss Cave. Aline, dear, ring for tea. It's early, I know, but I want mine immensely."

Aline obeyed. She glanced furtively at her mother. The Little 'Un was holding something back, and Aline could not make it out. The Little 'Un was mentally on tiptoe; very bright-eyed, her lips closed as upon a secret.

"I want you to know all that Aline knows," began Miss Arabella, laboriously, from the divan to which Aline had led her. "I want——"

The Little 'Un was growing not nervous, but impatient.

"As a matter of fact, Miss Cave, I think it highly probable that you are mistaken in your facts. I had two messages

from my husband this morning and he was very far from despondent. I don't believe for a moment that the disaster you fear will come to anything."

That, thought Aline, was very nearly foolish.

"I don't think it will help Miss Cave or us if we are more optimistic than we ought to be," she put in. "You know, dear, we bought an evening paper at lunch-time, and things were very much worse than they were in the morning—and they were bad enough then."

"They may have seemed to be, love," said Lady Margaret, with that bright, still excitement, "but I don't think they were. It all turns on that contract, and I think your father has got the contract."

"Mr. Williams said the others have got it."

"They were still haggling over it," said Lady Margaret, turning restlessly away. "Supposing that Roly has found the backing that was necessary——"

"Mr. Williams implied that that was impossible," said Aline, unhappily.

"And, besides," she added, "if Father had got the contract, the shares of Prade and Watkins would have gone up—and they've gone steadily down."

"Well, we shall know quite soon now," said Lady Margaret. "Here's tea."

"With Lady Margaret's permission, I shall make a point of explaining to Sir Rowland my share in his misfortune," said Arabella. Her eyes had not lost their despair. She was quite unobservant of Lady Margaret's enigmatical buoyancy and Aline's bewilderment. She was absorbed in her own remorse.

"You must do as you like, Miss Cave," said Lady Margaret, "but I don't think. . . . What have the shares to do with it, Aline?"

Aline explained.

"And the shares were still going down at midday—would that mean that he has not got the contract?"

"As I understand Mr. Williams's explanation, the price of the shares is a sort of thermometer—telling us whether poor Daddy's temperature is rising or falling. Only it's the other way up, if you understand me. When the price falls——"

"Midday," nodded Lady Margaret, thoughtfully. "Well. . . ."

There fell another long, strained silence, which seemed to distress Arabella the least. It was as if she welcomed the dumb endurance of disaster.

"It's half-past four," said Aline. "He should be here at any minute now."

"And then we shall know," said Lady Margaret, almost hysterically.

"And then we shall know," Arabella's voice was little above a whisper.

A moment later—

"That's his latch-key," gasped Aline.

Lady Margaret darted out of the drawing-room into the hall. She left the door ajar. Aline on her feet, her clasped hands pressed against her mouth, listened unashamedly.

She heard her father's voice cry "Little 'Un!" and knew that he was kissing her. She looked across at Arabella. Arabella had hidden her face.

The next instant Aline started; Arabella clutched the sides of her chair. There came a raucous, tuneless bellow from the hall.

"I like pickled onions,
I like piccalilli,
Pickled cabbage is all right
With a little cold beef—"

The door was flung open by the double weight of Sir Rowland and Lady Margaret, as he waltzed her off her feet and roared his ribald ditty. The next second he had released Lady Margaret with perilous suddenness and was gaping at Arabella.

"Oh Lord, Little 'Un!" he gasped. "What on earth am I to do?"

Aline was shaking his arm wildly.

"Daddy, what does it mean, are you all right?"

Sir Rowland still gaped and muttered.

"Right as rain! Miss Cave, I beg you to accept my apologies for this outrageous exhibition. Ebullition of spirits! Anti-climax! Reaction from a very terrible strain. Unpardonable——"

"Stop it!" commanded Aline, trembling from the suspense. "Have you been ruined by Western Coalfields? Miss Cave wants to know that as much as we do,"

"Sit down, Rowland," commanded Lady Margaret.

"At this moment," said Sir Rowland, "Western Coalfields exists or does not exist exactly as I wish. To be more accurate, on settling day, which is to-morrow week, I shall expect the managing director of Western Coalfields to call on me with the object of learning whether I intend to make him a bankrupt or not."

"But the shares, Daddy? The shares? They were at four and sixpence at midday."

"They were, my dear, they were," said Sir Rowland. "At two o'clock they were at three and ninepence. When the House closed they were at twenty-five shillings. I don't know what fancy figure they will be at to-morrow. It really doesn't matter. Mr. Turley Cave——"

He broke off and glanced at Arabella, very stiff and grey upon her divan.

"Really this is a most impossible position!" he puffed. "I really hardly know what to say, Miss Cave. You are, I believe, *au fait* with the facts of the situation."

Arabella bent her head.

"Please go on, Sir Rowland. You were going to say something about my brother?"

"Would you not prefer to hear what had happened from your brother himself?"

"I never intend to speak to my brother again," choked Arabella. "If he has tried to ruin you and failed, I would like to hear you say so—it was I who provided him with the means of menacing you."

"While labouring under a mistake," added Aline quickly.

"Yes," said Arabella, "while labouring under a mistake."

There was a silence. Aline could see that her father would have given anything in reason to avoid the necessity of explanation. She leant over and touched Arabella's knee.

"Can't we leave it with the knowledge that father has not been ruined? Everything's going to be so splendid now——"

"Not for everybody!" The interruption came from Sir Rowland. "It's a very awkward situation, but it will have to be faced. Perhaps it would be better to get it over now. It is not merely that your brother has failed to

smash my Company, Miss Cave. I'm afraid—I have smashed his Company—or rather his Company is not actually involved, but—he himself is."

"Is Turley ruined?" asked Arabella, slowly.

"On paper—yes," answered Sir Rowland. "But of course we shall make some arrangement."

Arabella's upward glance appealed to Aline for elucidation.

"What do you mean by 'on paper,' Daddy?"

"It's really quite simple. Miss Cave lent her brother that money in order that he might be able to accept the Trans-Continental, Limited, contract. My firm has hitherto held that contract. But this year I was unable to finance it. With the money borrowed from Miss Cave, Mr. Turley Cave *was* able to give proof that he could finance it. The contract was virtually his. I was at the end of my tether and couldn't obtain the necessary backing. Then——"

"Roly!"

Lady Margaret had checked him with a touch, but she was not looking at him. She was looking at Aline. Sir Rowland shifted uncomfortably and began again.

"I was at the end of my tether when a backer turned up. A very substantial backer. His money enabled my firm to secure the contract at the last moment."

Sir Rowland puffed again. Lady Margaret still looked at Aline, who was frowning at the fire.

"I thank God," said Arabella, "that my brother—and I—failed."

"Unfortunately for himself, Miss Cave," said Sir Rowland, "your brother was not content with the contract even when he thought it was certain that he had it. He tried to make a fortune on the Stock Exchange. He drove down the price of our shares by selling them, but as soon as I got the contract, I instructed my brokers to buy all the Prade and Watkins shares offered. I needn't go into the whole thing—it stands at present that Turley Cave has sold me shares which I alone possess together with shares that actually don't exist. I can put any price I choose upon those shares. I can, if I want to, call upon him to stand and deliver up every penny he possesses—but, of course, I shall do no such thing. I shall make an arrangement which I trust will be considered fair to all parties concerned."

"Justice——" began Miss Arabella.

"Who was your backer, dear?" asked Aline.

Something in her tone, in Lady Margaret's quivering silence and Sir Rowland's discomfiture, caught Arabella's attention. She half rose.

"I think I ought to go. I must not intrude. Now that I know I have done no harm——"

There was a sound at the door. The butler entered and stood aside.

"Mrs. Barnaby. Mr. Stephen Barnaby."

Aline's wide eyes went to Stephen and his mother. There were no others with them and yet they brought the sense of crowds; of force and urgency and clamour.

"Oh, what is it?" she cried out to them.

Stephen, white with fatigue and that same excitement which illumined Lady Margaret's every glance, stammered out something Aline could not catch. Mrs. Barnaby was making odd, choking sounds only barely recognisable as words.

"Sir Rowland Prade? I——"

The blood pounded to Aline's head. What—oh, *what* was the matter?

"Mother, please—Aunt Araby, can't you persuade mother not to—to go into things?"

"Stephen," begged Aline, "I don't understand. Little 'Un——"

Lady Margaret threw up her head. She was standing very erectly at her husband's side.

"Mrs. Barnaby," she said, "any fault there is, is mine. Entirely mine. My husband's need came first. My husband's need always has come first with me, and always will."

Aline looked wildly round. Mrs. Barnaby's eyes were hidden by her shaking hands, but all the others—and to Aline the room seemed insanely full of people—were staring at her. Why? *Why?*

"Blenkiron money to destroy Blenkiron money," panted Mrs. Barnaby, from behind those agonised hands. "Oh, how Uncle Gregory must be laughing—laughing——"

Blenkiron money to destroy——? And then Aline thought she saw the meaning.

"Christopher!" she gasped. "You went to him,

Little 'Un! He saved us." She was carried away, heedless of her listeners. "Oh, how like him! How will I ever be able to repay? To love like that——"

The dead silence seemed to rise and strike her across the mouth. Her father, shocked, staring; the Little 'Un covering him, at bay; Miss Arabella rigid and Mrs. Barnaby twisted as though in agony of body.

And Stephen——

"*Christopher?*" muttered Stephen. "Christopher Cordant? Why should he——? Aline!" Suddenly he was shouting at her. "He's the man you—— But he's not free, Aline, and it's I who've done things—big things. You can't still say I must do big things, Aline, before you'll care! I told you I would throw all my money into the sea. . . ."

They faced each other. Youth faced youth, while those who had borne them stood forgotten.

"Aline, I said I'd make you care again! I've done it, haven't I? I've done the big thing for you. God, to think I never guessed it was Christopher! But he couldn't do what I did! I gave it. Gladly—yes. I did give it! I made it a condition that it should be a gift. . . . So that I might become poor for you. . . . My money against Aunt Araby's, and I won! Aline."

His voice too died away, conquered by the silence.

"Say something——" he whispered.

"If you and my mother valued me at a quarter of a million——"

"Aline!" thundered Sir Rowland.

"Let her speak," said Lady Margaret. "She has every right."

"There is nothing left for me to say. I can hardly put a higher price upon myself, can I? My weight in gold——" Her voice shrilled and broke.

Mrs. Barnaby dashed her hands together.

"Oh, why didn't I warn you—why wasn't I given time to warn you, Stephen? I knew about Christopher——"

"He doesn't count, Mother. Aline, he *doesn't* count, against what I have done?"

And then Miss Arabella rose up.

"You can't hold by loving if you're not loved in return, and why should you? Can you hold the wind if it pulls against you?" She gathered Aline up in her arms.

"There, there, there, now, let's go back to that nice hotel and have some more—*fun!*"

But Aline slid between the enfolding arms to the floor with Stephen's voice in her ears and desolation in the dark that swept upon her and bore her away.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE FIRST FACT—

TWO days later, at the same hour of half-lights and shadows, Christopher Cordant pushed aside his work and went to the window, inexplicably and powerfully certain that Aline was on her way to him.

As he stood looking out upon the winter afternoon, he reflected that he had no news for her. He had not even gone, as he had said he would, a step or two in each of the directions indicated by the cross-roads ; there had been no opportunity. Jacintha had spent at Grosvenor Square the whole of every day and such evenings as Christopher had given up to his own work. In their hours of leisure her manner had been so flawless that it put him under a spell ; bound him over, as it were, not to break the peace. He had found it impossible to put the difficult situation into words.

Pinar, he gathered, was to be at Grosvenor Square permanently. In further evasions of his questions, Jacintha added vaguely that Pinar was quite beyond an Englishman's understanding.

Of Miriam, Turley, Arabella, Christopher had seen nothing. He had called at the house in Chelsea to find Mrs. Barnaby and Stephen out and Miss Arabella Cave no longer staying there ; returning to the Institute he had faced Lady Margaret, waiting for him, asking for the help he had failed to give. . . .

" Ah ! " said Christopher, with deep satisfaction. A taxi had driven up to the door. He turned from the window and drew a comfortable chair to the fire. No need to see Aline stepping out and mounting the steps ; when one loved, one knew. . . .

The door was opened more gently than he had expected ;

Aline would generally fumble a little with the handle and laugh at her clumsiness. To-day she was quiet, very quiet.

"Christopher."

She said it so softly that he could barely hear it. There was a change in her. She came up to him and touched him lightly upon the breast.

It was not passion that drove his arms round her and his lips upon hers; rather it was the deep need of her presence, and the knowledge of her need of his. For a long moment they clung together, comfort in their sense of one another; children, lost in a darkening wilderness. . . .

"Sorry," said Christopher, at last, putting her in the big chair. "I oughtn't to have done that. . . . Let me look at you."

He looked: then—

"What has happened, Aline?"

She sighed, drawing his hand down to her face. She spoke with her cheek against his palm.

"Stay so. I'm so tired. . . . I expect you know most of what's happened, don't you? Mother told me she went to you first."

"Yes. She just flashed in and out and I—wasn't able to do anything but stare."

"She says you offered her your last penny."

"It was no good to her. I divided my own portion, as you know—half is Jacintha's—and it was quite useless to ask her to help. . . . I saw by the papers that your father won. I've been wondering——"

"Mother went to the only other person in the world who would and could help—Stephen."

"Stephen! And he lent——?"

"No. Stephen didn't lend it. He *gave* it to mother. He made that a condition. He's observing the condition in the face of everything we can say or do. He won't take the money back."

Christopher drew his hand away and moved so that he could see her face.

"Your father only used it for a few hours, surely! He will have enough now to finance the contract without Stephen."

"Of course!" said Aline. "But that doesn't alter the fact that Stephen won't take it back. He's made a gift of

it. . . . No, it's not exactly ridiculous. You see, at the time mother worked on his feelings—about me—for father's sake. She's perfectly frank about it."

Christopher frowned.

"Your mother hinted to me that she intended to do something of the sort if necessary. I didn't take her altogether seriously. Now she's actually done it. If—well, Lady Margaret is your mother."

For a moment the old light shone out in Aline's eyes.

"She's much more than a mother. She's a wife—a perfectly splendid wife! I don't blame her in the least. I would have done the same for you."

"Aline!"

"No, not again. But I love to know you want to kiss me. . . . No, Christopher, *please*"

"Well, go on," said Christopher, presently. "Do you mean to say that your mother got the money from him by giving a hint that it would be a very sound means of persuading you to marry him?"

"She admits it quite freely; Daddy knew nothing of the psychology of it, apparently. The Little 'Un's told Stephen now that she was deliberately deceiving him—she doesn't spare herself!—but he sees only his own point of view. He talks about having 'won' me."

"Mediæval absurdity! You must tell him it's rough luck, but he's made a fool of himself."

Aline shook her head.

"It would all be meaningless to Stephen. In a moment he gave up everything he had, in effect, to me. He is still in that moment, Christopher. He may stay in it for the rest of his life."

Christopher stood very still.

"You can't—is it possible that you consider yourself indebted to the extent of marrying him? No, you'd never think as confusedly as that!"

"I don't feel that I have a debt to pay. All the same, I think—I intend to marry him."

After a moment, Christopher laughed. There was no trace of amusement in the sound.

"Intend to marry him *if* you and she go back to Sicily," added Aline.

Christopher stopped laughing.

"If you are in Sicily," she continued evenly, "it doesn't

matter very much to me what kind of life I live ; but I shall have to have plenty to do, so as not to think. . . . Stephen offers me a purpose, Christopher. All this excitement—this refusal to take back the money—what does it mean ? It means that to him I am a romantic ideal. I've known that for some time. When we've been married a very short time, he will discover that I am not an ideal at all but a woman. Then we can get to work. I believe in his talent in spite of him, and I believe in his manhood."

Christopher leant his head against the mantelshef and was silent.

" Sicily ! " he said, after a while. " Long hours of nothingness ; rest without anything to rest from. Idle comings and goings. Beauty all round, everywhere, unearned ; quite worthless. And you—the very quick of life—a ghost ; a tragic secret."

" I can't bear the sound of it," she cried out sharply. " Don't—don't let me hear it in words." She controlled herself and forced a certain lightness back upon them. " Besides, I'm afraid it isn't a secret any more. I blurted it out the other afternoon, to father, Mrs. Barnaby and Stephen and Miss Arabella—the whole crowd. I was overwrought, and when mother said that father had found a backer, I jumped to the conclusion that it was you and—I don't know what I said, but I—published the news. Think of me as an hysterical, love-lorn miss, Christopher, complete to the Victorian faint ! "

Christopher started.

" You fainted ? "

" Best thing I could do after being such an idiot as to let it all out ! "

" That doesn't matter—at least—it certainly doesn't as far as I'm concerned. How did they take it ? Didn't it rather upset Stephen's view of the situation ? "

" By the time I had fully recovered he'd gone ; so had his mother. I've seen them both since, though. Mrs. Barnaby—oh, I'm so sorry for her ! . . . I said nothing to Daddy, nor he to me. After a bit I went back to the Parnassus with Miss Arabella, who was fearfully sympathetic and kind. She's a perfect dear, Christopher. She waxed indignant at the idea of Stephen wanting to marry me against my will. She says it's *wicked* to go on loving a person who's stopped loving you."

The mimicry of Arabella's manner, together with the sentiment expressed, drew an involuntary laugh from Christopher. The laughter sobered to admiration.

"You really accomplished that miracle then, Aline?"

"I really did, Christopher. I helped her to discover that she doesn't really want to marry Daddy at all. She's very glad she didn't. She nearly went out of her mind when she thought that her money had been the means of ruining him after she had found that she didn't want to hurt him at all."

"So much for Uncle Gregory's dominant-desire nonsense! Lord, I wish you'd been sitting at that writing-table, too, when he went for each of us in turn!"

"She's changed very much indeed," repeated Aline. "She's quite penetrating, too. I let her discuss Stephen with me as she'd had such an awful day—Stephen and you and me—she made the same discovery as we made at Guildford. That the future of all of us was bound up with the question of who killed Gregory Blenkiron."

"Odd!" said Christopher, half to himself. "I've had an idea lately that if Araby could keep her head for five minutes and answer questions intelligently, she might be of use."

His thoughts went back to the issue he and she had seen so clearly at Guildford.

"I've made no headway at all," he confessed, his voice harsh with impatience. "I'm still at the cross-roads."

She nodded. The firelight showed him her own fatigue and bafflement.

"Miss Arabella made me understand more clearly the awful difficulty of discovering anything at all, *now*. She has rather a gift of narrative, did you know? She's made me see you all sitting round that table and herself, afterwards, talking to Mr. Blenkiron alone with the flowers and the hyoscine where he couldn't see it—— By the way——"

She broke off and pondered. Christopher waited.

"Leaving yourself out of account," she said slowly, "Can you say of any of the others positively that he or she had no hand in it?"

Christopher thought for a moment.

"No."

"Miss Arabella can. She knows that Mr. Turley Cave

did *not* do it. She knows that for certain, and I think that is all she does know. It's a tiny little negative, but it is something."

"How can she know for certain?" Christopher was sceptical.

"She was watching him all night."

"What?"

Christopher was aware of intense surprise. Arabella knew Turley hadn't done it; knew it for certain. How amazing that Arabella should be the only one to proffer a real, solid, ungarnished fact!

"I always thought she suspected Miriam," he exclaimed.

"She did. She still does. Let me explain—not in the way she explained, but in my own way." Aline leant forward eagerly. "She was led to suspecting Miriam by—her dominant desire. I've beaten Gregory Blenkiron there, Christopher. He thought her dominant desire was revenge or hatred or spite or something. I found it wasn't. It was just—babies."

"Ba——! Where does Miriam come in?"

"I wish you would jump to a conclusion sometimes, you dearest! Miss Arabella wasn't ever really going to commit a murder for the sake of a spite which was only superficial. She may have thought she was, but her subconscious self would have thought it a most inadequate motive. Her subconscious self knew that the only adequate motive in the world to her was a mother's affection for her child. Her dislike of Miriam, although she hardly knows it, is envy of her motherhood. The two combined made her think that Miriam would do the murder; possibly she would have done the murder in Miriam's place, for Miriam's motive."

Christopher had thrown himself into the chair opposite her.

"I've got that," he nodded. "But you said Turley——"

"It's very simple," said Aline. "Arabella reasons that Miriam dropped the hyoscine in Mr. Blenkiron's glass when she was in the room with him. That would have killed Mr. Blenkiron, but it would not of itself have given Miriam the fortune. To get the fortune she had to go back to the room after the death—after four o'clock in the morning—to destroy the other three wills."

"Yes. Go on."

"Well, it occurred to Miss Arabella that her brother,

for his own motive, might also have dropped the hyoscine into the glass. Or he might have counted upon herself or Miriam doing it, and might have himself slipped in first and destroyed all wills but his own—cheating the actual murderer, as it were. You see, any one of the four of you might have cheated in that way.”

“Quite!” agreed Christopher, excitedly. “So she watched Turley because——”

“Because she knew that if anyone was going to cheat, it would be Turley. She wanted to prevent him from cheating. Equally, if he had also dropped hyoscine in, she wanted to prevent him from collecting his reward. You see, she wanted Miriam to go through with it—get the fortune; for Stephen.”

“What about me? Suppose I cheated? Or——”

“She left you out of account altogether. Partly because she realised that if you had done it, you would almost certainly have told them so. She doesn’t reason about that kind of thing, she just feels—and often she feels right. And so she changed her bedroom.”

“Did she? I’d no idea. . . . How did that help her?”

“She used to sleep on the same floor as Mr. Blenkiron I gather,” said Aline. Christopher nodded. “On the first floor. On the second floor, she told me, was Mr. Turley’s room. You know that floor, Christopher.”

“Yes. Upstairs on the left—Marpleton’s room—the room in which he used to do the accounts. Then a right-angle and two rooms containing Mrs. Blenkiron’s property that were always kept locked. A turn to the right——” Christopher’s fingers drew it on his knee; “Turley’s sitting-room. Another right-angle, and then Turley’s bedroom; then a spare-room, then a room in which some more lumber was stored. That beastly house was full of lumber-rooms. Where did Arabella sleep?”

“In the spare-room next to her brother’s bedroom; at least, she didn’t do much in the way of sleeping. She knew that no move would be made until after four o’clock—when Gregory Blenkiron would wake up and drink the dose. She lay awake until then, and at four o’clock she climbed on to a chair and kept her eyes glued on the corridor. She watched for two hours and knows that Turley didn’t pass down the corridor—that he didn’t leave his bedroom.”

"He might not have been in the room at all."

"He was. She heard him moving about. If he had come out, she would have been bound to see him."

There was a pause.

"It's very surprising!" said Christopher. "In a sense it all boils down to very little. But if we accept Arabella's evidence that Turley did not enter Uncle Gregory's room, we must also accept the conclusion that Arabella herself did not enter the room. It eliminates two of them, or neither of them."

"A sign-post!" said Aline.

Christopher looked at her. There was colour in her cheeks again. Her voice regained an echo of its lilt. Her dress was the colour of wine.

He saw for an instant nothing of her body; only the white light of her soul—the courage, the endurance. He saw her as she would be if he went to Sicily and she married Stephen. He saw her growing old. . . . He would not be with her when the first white hair came and little wrinkles crowded where now the skin was firm and smooth as rose-petals. He would not see her conquer life by jesting with death; he would not see the gaiety of her, the wild, gallant, imperishable youth of her shine out through the long tale of days. But he would know. He would know . . .

It seemed natural that he should be kneeling at her side as she lay back in the deep chair; and that he should hold her hand to his lips, to his heart, in tribute of his undying faith in her. . . .

CHAPTER XXXVII

—AND THE SECOND

AN hour later Christopher was mounting the steps of the house in Grosvenor Square. He had never removed the latch-key from his ring, and with that he admitted himself. As he closed the door behind him with a certain unwilling furtiveness, he felt the atmosphere of the house descend upon him.

It had a peculiar stuffiness, a confident stuffiness that defied ventilation, Christopher remembered that stuffiness of old. He remembered how it had risen up to greet him when he came home from school. It had pursued him as he went to pay his respects to Uncle Gregory. Only in his mother's rooms could he get away from it. His mother, ignoring comment, had chosen the rooms on the top floor for her own. Afterwards they had become Christopher's.

Christopher checked an impulse to go up and look at them. He had had his belongings stored; there remained merely the empty shell of his old home. Besides, Jacintha was somewhere in the house, superintending the redecoration of the first floor. He did not wish to encounter her. He ascended the stairs, passing the first floor, and reached the second.

On the second floor he turned to the right. Turley's sitting-room that had been! There was Turley's bedroom-door at the head of the passage. Round the right-angle would be the room that Arabella said she had occupied.

He had determined to investigate on the spot. How did one investigate? What could he hope to gain by an examination of the rooms, with the position of which he was perfectly familiar? That had been the difficulty from the first. It was easy to talk of probing into the doubt, very difficult to discover how to set about it. Detectives

were trained in that kind of thing ; it had been impossible to employ a detective. On impulse, he opened the door of Turley's bedroom.

"Hullo, Chris !"

Turley, in his shirt sleeves, engaged with a chest of drawers, looked up at him with an odd sheepishness.

"Hullo ! I had no idea you were here. Sorry !"

"Don't apologise, dear boy. Your house. Your wife was good enough to suggest some time ago that I should return here. As there is no possibility of my being able to pay the rent anywhere else, I thought I'd better accept the invitation."

Christopher shut the door. He had never liked Turley, but had always admired his resiliency. There was something unpleasant, something spuriously pathetic in Turley cracking feeble jokes about his own penury.

"What sort of a mess are you really in, Turley ?" he asked.

"You can think of it as any sort of mess you like," answered Turley, "as long as you think of it up to the neck, and then some. Unless an inconceivable miracle happens between now and settling day, which is next Tuesday, I have lost every penny I have, every penny I have borrowed, and a lot more besides—to your friend Sir Rowland Prade."

"How did it happen ?" said Christopher.

"Exploiting the morbid emotionalism of a disappointed woman," quoted Turley, bitterly. "That was what you said when you pitched into me about Arabella, wasn't it ? If you'd only gone on to point out that I'd get up against me the equally morbid eroticism of Stephen Barnaby, I'd have listened hard."

Christopher said nothing.

"All the dear old proverbs romping home in a bunch !" said Turley. "Poetic justice ! That about digging the pit for others. Hoist with my own petard, and so on."

"If it all lies with Prade, I daresay he'll compromise," suggested Christopher.

"If he does, it will be an act of charity," snapped Turley. "Don't think I'd be particularly good at holding out the hat, old man. Unless the aforesaid miracle materialises—which between you and me it won't—on Tuesday next Prade can collect roughly half a million

from me—which will include Arabella's bit. In fact, not to put too fine a point upon it, he has half Uncle Gregory's money in his pocket at this moment."

"He's got three-quarters! Stephen made a clear gift to Lady Margaret, and, as I understand it, refuses to have the money returned."

"I'm going to get a photograph of that young man," said Turley. "Of course that's punk! Prade won't stand for that kind of nonsense. But I say, you know, if one were superstitious—even your bit hasn't made you any happier, has it, Chris?"

"I'm not superstitious," said Christopher, sharply. "You're getting at the 'tainted money' idea."

"There may be something in it," said Turley, with a shrug. "After all, you don't believe any more than I do that the old man died naturally."

There was a pause. Turley, leaning against the chest of drawers, lit a cigarette and stared at Christopher.

"Have you got any theories?" asked Christopher, in spite of himself.

"None that are worth repeating."

"Frankly, do you think that I did it? I've always felt that you had a faint suspicion."

"Then you've been off the mark," said Turley. "I know you didn't do it."

Christopher started.

"How the devil can you *know*?"

Turley grinned.

"And I *know* Miriam didn't do it."

"Do you know that Arabella didn't do it?" asked Christopher, eagerly.

"No," answered Turley. "I'm not saying that I think she did do it, mind. I am just saying that I know you two didn't whereas I don't know that she didn't. I'll own up that I originally thought—I was convinced—that Arabella had done it. Subsequently I wavered, and now, I—well, I really haven't got a definite opinion on the subject."

"Don't let's wander!" said Christopher. "Get back to the statement that you know that neither Miriam nor myself did it. How can you know?"

"If either of you had done the funny business with the wine-glass, you would have come down shortly after four

for the purpose of attending to the wills. Neither of you did. Come here."

With an odd feeling that he had lied when he had said that he was not superstitious, Christopher allowed Turley to take him by the arm to the door. By the door Turley placed a chair and urged Christopher on to it.

"Look through that fan-light," said Turley. "What do you see?"

"I can see straight along the corridor to the turn in the passage on the other side of the staircase," said Christopher, with laborious precision.

"Exactly. You and Miriam went to your rooms on the floors above. I saw you go. To get to Uncle Gregory's room you would have had to pass across my line of vision—and you didn't."

"But how do you *know* we didn't?"

"I was standing as you are from the time you went to bed till six-thirty—that's how."

Christopher stood on the chair looking foolishly down at Turley. Turley misinterpreted his silence.

"First time I've spoken of this to anyone, I assure you. Not like Miriam or Araby, perpetually harping on the mystery. But getting smashed up by Prade like this rather brings back the old man—his sneering way of talking about Western Coalfields and the fix I was in when he came out with all that million-for-a-murder rot. And then, you seemed suddenly interested——"

Christopher descended heavily from the chair.

"I am suddenly interested. My policy was at first to know nothing; to keep clear of knowing anything. Now I think that was rather a mistake. . . . What you say is extraordinarily illuminating, Turley. You kept a watch on Miriam and me until six-thirty?"

"About that. Marpleton started buzzing about then, and I knew there was no need to wait any longer."

"And you suspected Arabella!"

"I did. I knew how she hated Prade. It may seem odd to you that, thinking she did it, I should have kept an eye on Miriam and you——"

"But it doesn't seem odd to me," cut in Christopher. "I'll tell you just how you reasoned. You suspected Arabella. You thought that Miriam or I might cheat her, by slipping in quickly and dealing with the wills. You

believed that Arabella had done it, and you wanted her to collect the money. Or even if she hadn't done it, you still wanted her to have a chance of collecting the money. Not out of altruism, my dear Turley, but because you calculated it would suit your book better that she should inherit than that either of us should. You had the Prade programme in your mind at the time, eh?"

"That's damned uncanny!" gasped Turley. He pulled himself up with a laugh. "But, of course, you must have figured out, as I did, that there was that hopelessly weak spot in the old man's arrangements. It was quite possible for one or more to have done the murder and any one of the four of us to have slipped in and worked the wills, whether or not he or she actually committed the murder."

Christopher nodded.

"I didn't figure it out, though," he said. "I did nothing at all. It was pointed out to me—by Arabella."

"Araby?"

"Do you still think Arabella did it?"

"I tell you I haven't any definite opinion on the subject. I'm relating what happened at the time."

"Weren't you a bit startled on the following morning when the will in my favour was found?"

"I was. Jacintha gave me a plausible theory—the one who had done it leaves someone else's will there. The safest 'someone' would be yourself, because you'd be decent enough to share. I thought it a bit subtle for Araby certainly. And, as I told you, lately I have wavered——"

"Where do you think Araby was all the time you were heading off Miriam and me?"

"In her room on the floor below."

"Well, she wasn't. She was in the next room—in there." Christopher pointed in the direction of the spare-room. "She was bitten with the idea that Miriam had done it. She was determined that you shouldn't slip in and cheat Miriam. Whether she wanted Miriam to be hanged or wanted Miriam to attain her object, I don't know. You had better ask her. The plain fact is that she was perched up by her fanlight waiting for you to open the door. I don't think she stood up the whole night. She was listening and could hear you moving about, fidgeting, and so on. At four o'clock she got ready to stop you if you started down to destroy the wills."

"Well I'm—— But she couldn't see my room—it's in a line with this."

"No. But she could see you the moment you left the room and turned the corner to get to the stairs. There her line of vision breaks. She could not see the stair-head, as you could. The result is that Araby knows that *you* did not go down to Uncle Gregory's bedroom. You know that neither Miriam nor myself went down, and, unconsciously, you kept a watch on Araby also and know she did not go down. Well, add it all up!"

"Good Lord, then! None of us did it!" cried Turley.

"None of the four of us destroyed the three wills," amended Christopher, "if Arabella's tale is true."

"Marpleton will know."

Turley slipped on his coat and made for the door. Christopher followed.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

SIMPLE ADDITION

CHRISTOPHER hurried after Turley downstairs into the little room that had been called the secretary's room. Turley rang. Then—
“ You'll have to do it, Chris,” he said. “ You're boss here.”

It was an irrelevancy that irritated Christopher. He knew that Turley had discovered on the way downstairs that it would be very difficult to tackle Marpleton. Marpleton had always been difficult. His position in Gregory Blenkiron's house had been peculiar ; his position in a house belonging legally to Christopher, practically to Jacintha, and morally to no one, was pathetic. Nominally he was caretaker. Actually he was a bit of lumber, stored away with the rest.

“ How are you, Marpleton ? ” asked Christopher, as Marpleton entered.

“ Quite well, sir, thank you.”

“ Good ! ” said Christopher. “ I meant to drop in and talk to you. We'll have a chat later on. I daresay you've thought about the question of retiring on a pension.”

“ Thank you, sir. As long as you have any need of me I shall be very glad to stay on, although, of course, things take a bit of getting used to.”

Christopher nodded sympathetically.

“ I understand that Mrs. Cordant is fitting up part of the house for her personal use, sir ? Possibly she might require my services ? ”

“ Very probably, Marpleton. But it isn't settled yet. Well . . . I wanted to see you about something else. I want you to carry your mind back to the night of Mr. Blenkiron's death.”

“ Yes, sir ? ”

"Were there any changes made that night—in the ordinary domestic routine, I mean?"

Marpleton hesitated.

"No, sir, I don't think so. The only thing out of the ordinary I can recollect is Miss Cave sleeping in a different room."

Turley bit off an ejaculation.

"You didn't—er—change the room over, I suppose, Marpleton. One of the maids, of course! I suppose the maids have gone?"

"Yes, sir. But I think Miss Cave's own maid did the work herself, sir. On the following morning—after we knew Mr. Blenkiron was dead—I remember one of the housemaids saying that Miss Cave had told her to move her things back to her former room."

"I see," said Christopher. "So you think Miss Cave decided at the last moment to sleep in the spare-room and didn't wish to trouble the servants?"

"Yes, sir. I remember we discussed it. The maid thought it was second-sight; that Miss Cave was frightened. Oh, and there was another thing, sir."

"Yes?" said Christopher, eagerly.

"I went to bed a little later myself. I noticed that the light was burning on the second landing and I turned it off. I had one or two things left over to do downstairs, and about twenty minutes later—that would have been about half-past eleven or a quarter to twelve—I noticed that the light had been turned on again, so I left it."

Christopher waited to give Turley an opportunity to speak.

"After you knew that Mr. Blenkiron was dead, Marpleton," said Turley, "what was the first occasion on which you entered the room?"

"I went on Mr. Cordant's orders to clear the room up after the funeral."

"No one else had been into the room since the death?"

"Only Dr. Stanton, sir, and the undertakers."

"Anything unusual about the room, Marpleton?"

"No, sir."

"We've missed some rather important papers," he explained, "and we think that Mr. Blenkiron destroyed them when he was under the influence of morphia. We know that he had those papers with him in bed on his

last night alive. You didn't find any torn fragments of paper littered about the floor near the bed ? ”

“ No, sir.”

“ You are quite sure ? ”

“ Quite sure, sir. The room was always very tidy and I'm certain that I should have noticed it.”

“ Thanks, Marpleton.”

The butler left the room.

“ I turned the light on the second time,” said Turley, after a pause. “ I wonder what Araby would have done if I hadn't ? Anyhow, Marpleton has confirmed her yarn.”

Christopher was sunk in thought.

“ Things are slipping into place,” he said, half to himself.

“ None of the four of us made any attempt to go to Uncle Gregory's room and arrange the wills. Someone took the other three wills away and left the one in my favour. H'm ! We four alone knew that an envelope with ' D ' on it *was* a will in my favour.”

Turley began to speak and checked himself.

“ What's that ? ”

“ My dear Chris, the discussion's a little difficult, and I don't know that we are gaining anything——”

“ Cough it up, man ! ” It was a definite challenge.

“ All right, then. Remember you started it and I didn't. You're driven to the conclusion—absolutely driven to it—that somebody beside us four must have known the contents of those four envelopes. The most probable person to know is Jacintha. She knew pretty nearly everything else about Uncle Gregory. It's ten to one she addressed the envelopes. She might have just glanced at one of the wills. That would have been enough for a really intelligent woman to guess the main essentials of the whole game. . . . You insisted that I should spout my views, you know.”

“ Quite so,” said Christopher. “ Why should she leave mine ? ”

He added, as Turley floundered :

“ Take it that Jacintha was in love with me at the time. Rather a risky way of showing her love ! If she knew what it all meant, she must have known that she was possibly landing me in the dock.”

Turley was unexpectedly persistent.

“ Haven't you discovered yet that Jacintha is a very

clever woman? She'd have seen round that dock all right. . . . She did see round it. She worked things so that if you made a fuss she and her vendetta would be for it; and if *we* made a fuss, Uncle Gregory would be proved to have been insane and to have died intestate. . . . But hang it, I'm not going to discuss it with you!"

"Why on earth not? If Jacintha were here she'd be perfectly willing to discuss it. Look here, I believe she's upstairs. I'll ask her to come down——"

"No, no," protested Turley. "Dash it all, we can't go into all that vendetta business again; it gets on my nerves! When it comes to going in for finance because you're worrying about not having killed your grandfather——"

They strolled out into the hall.

"I believe Jacintha did intend to kill the old boy and turned up too late," added Turley.

"So do I," agreed Christopher.

"As for the 'worry'—since we are speaking frankly—I—don't—know," said Turley. "There's rather much of it."

He nodded to Christopher and went slowly up the massive staircase. Christopher gave him time to reach his rooms, and then himself went up to the first floor in search of Jacintha.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE INSPIRED GUESS

ON the first floor hall, Christopher hesitated. Jacintha had told him so little of her plan of campaign that he had no idea in which room she was to be found.

He looked round him. To the right was the suite that had been Arabella's. In front, the room in which Gregory Blenkiron had died. Christopher had not entered it since his last interview with the old man. He felt a strong disinclination to enter it now. He turned aside and went into the suite.

The first glimpse brought him to a standstill.

The lights were full on, although the room was empty. Christopher gazed at a riot of colour. This was no place in which to entertain! It was a barbaric room, a bizarre setting for leisure hours. Reds and greens and blues, cunningly blended, gave life to a groundwork of dull black. A parroquet swayed on a perch against a curtain the colour of flame. Christopher strode across the gleaming floor and pushed the curtain aside; the room beyond was a bedroom, wonderful with lacquer and velvet. Beyond that, a bathroom, extravagantly equipped and, opening out of it on the other side, a second bedroom. Christopher checked an exclamation. It was full of his own things—the things that had furnished his other rooms! There were his books, his chairs. . . .

He went slowly back to the hallway, noting every luxurious detail. This, then, was to be the London *pied-à-terre* in the life Jacintha was planning with him. Christopher clenched his jaw. How sure she was of him, in spite of his avowed love for another woman! It was humiliating. . . . He found himself staring at Uncle Gregory's door. What had Jacintha made of that austere bedroom? Angrily he went in.

Again surprise brought him to a halt. He had expected anything from an art-gallery to an orchid-house. He saw—Uncle Gregory's bedroom. Nothing was changed. The revolving table stood by the bed. The writing-table was across the corner. The open door of the corner cupboard revealed medicine-bottles and glasses. The curtains were not drawn.

At the foot of the bed stood Jacintha, looking down at something Christopher could not see. He took a step forward and she swung round.

"Christopher!"

There was, for an instant, confusion in her look and voice; but it passed.

"What brings *you* here?" she asked.

Before Christopher could answer a smothered sound caught his ear. Jacintha bent down.

"Pinar is hysterical," she explained, laconically. "She often is; she will make herself ill." She pulled petulantly at the woman's shoulder. "We'd better leave her, I suppose."

Christopher ignored the suggestion. He too bent to the huddled figure upon the floor. Pinar raised a face ravaged with weeping.

"Get up," said Christopher, quietly. Pinar hesitated, then, leaning heavily on his proffered arm, obeyed.

"What is the matter with you?" he asked.

"Go away and calm yourself, Pinar," interposed Jacintha, smoothly.

Pinar's face worked convulsively. A hoarse sob came from her, and then some quick, emphatic words in Spanish. Christopher repeated them as she stumbled from the room.

"What does that mean?" he asked. Jacintha laughed, with a forced note in her laughter.

"Oh, Christopher, your Spanish!"

"Very rotten, I don't doubt. But still I've got pretty near the sound of the words, haven't I? I should think I could get a translation of them from anyone who knows Spanish."

He had thrown a significance into his tone, and he saw by her sidelong glance at him that she recognised it.

"Pinar's words were—'If I cannot know, I shall die—*Si no consigo saberlo, moriré*,'" she said.

" Ah ! If she can't know—what ? "

Jacintha shrugged.

" Her problem is mine, Christopher. She is more than my servant, you know. She was my mother's foster-mother. It was Pinar who took the oath of vengeance for me. She knows that I failed to keep it. She is—a Spaniard. Unless I can assure her that he killed himself to escape me, she will grieve herself to death."

Christopher was silent. He did not fully believe the explanation. He pondered his plan of attack.

" Shall we not leave now ? " murmured Jacintha. " I did not expect that you would ever come here."

" I've been talking to Marpleton," said Christopher, " and to Turley."

" Yes. Poor Turley ! I fear he is quite penniless," said Jacintha, inscrutably. " You know, Christopher, some time ago I suggested that he should come back to his old rooms, and he refused ; but now he has changed his mind. I thought I might give him house-room, don't you think ? And Arabella too. Miriam, I suppose, will also be poor again."

" You've heard of Stephen's quixotic behaviour, then ? " Christopher met her look steadily.

" Yes ; from Turley. It is reckless, but it is—magnificent."

" It's——" Christopher bit off the words. Impossible to discuss with Jacintha Stephen's wooing of Aline ! " Which part of the house are you going to use for business purposes ? " he inquired instead.

" The ground-floor."

" I looked for you just now in the rooms that used to be Araby's."

Jacintha bit her lip.

" You saw them ! " She flung up her head. " Yes. They are a gamble, are they not ? "

" Yes, they are," said Christopher, curtly. " They're—well, we've agreed not to go into our affairs till the end of the month. . . . What are you going to do with this room ? You can't leave it as it is."

" Why not ? Pinar likes it so."

Christopher started.

" Pinar sleeps here," Jacintha informed him.

" Horrible ! "

The exclamation was torn from Christopher. He saw Jacintha stiffen.

"Horrible? Why?"

On Christopher's lips hovered a violent—"Because I'm beginning to be sure she killed Uncle Gregory." He swallowed hard, and searched for something more cautious. Before he could find it Jacintha had laid a hand on his arm.

"We have drifted on to the edge of another subject that is forbidden between us, that of Uncle Gregory's death," she said. Her eyes were unfathomably dark and hard. "I know you are averse from even thinking about it. To me, to Pinar, who wonder day and night—— But no matter. Let us go."

Christopher jerked his arm away. The tragedy of her air was intolerable.

"I have rather changed my attitude to the mystery," he said. "I've been wanting to talk to you about it. It may as well be here. It's morbidly appropriate, isn't it?"

Again he looked round the room.

"Won't you sit down, Jacintha?"

There was distinct reluctance in the way she moved across the room and sat down in the chair at the writing-table. Christopher, following her and settling himself on a corner of the table, had the idea that mentally as well as physically he had edged her into a corner.

"I think you will admit," he began, "that, however else I may have failed you, I have at least arrived at a clear understanding of your problem—and Pinar's. You planned to kill Uncle Gregory. He died before you could do so. To you and Pinar this means a despair that nothing can wipe out."

"You can wipe out mine, if you wish," breathed Jacintha. "I have told you so."

Christopher remained unperturbed.

"Possibly. That is our separate and personal affair. Let's take Pinar's angle. You say she is prostrated with grief because she does not know for certain the manner of his death." He paused a moment, then leant forward over the table. "And yet she of all people should know how he died," he rapped out. "She was in the room at the time."

Jacintha sat intensely still. Her eyes, bent upon her hands, remained downcast. No muscle of her face moved.

Yet Christopher knew, quite certainly, that he had roused a tumult of feeling within her.

He waited for her to speak. On the impulse of the moment he had flung into words the suspicion that, half unknown to him, had been crystallising in his brain. His talk with Aline at Guildford had created it. Turley's revelations had given it weight. Now he found himself using it as a weapon—a rapier of fully-tempered steel.

At last Jacintha raised her head and met his eyes. Her own were smouldering.

"I don't know quite what to say, Christopher. I feel as though you were trying to trap me. It's—not a pleasant sensation." Her voice broke. "That you and I should come to this——"

Christopher steeled himself. He noticed that she had circled round the nature of his statement altogether. As Turley said, she was a clever woman. She would neither affirm nor deny until she had probed the limit of his knowledge. Well, let her probe!

"I know the sensation you mean," said Christopher. "It is, as you say, an unpleasant one. The only way to avoid it is for both of us to lay our cards on the table; all of them."

"That implies that I have not been open with you, Christopher," she flashed. "If it were not laughable, it would hurt terribly. I who have spoken to the point of wearying you—of my every wish and hope, of my every action——"

"It is Pinar's actions we are discussing," Christopher pointed out coolly. She abandoned the pose of offended dignity, and he decided to bluff again. "Come, my dear," he added, "we're wasting time. As soon as Uncle Gregory was dead, Pinar destroyed three wills, leaving the one in my favour. You must admit that you left me to discover by myself that it is to her intervening that I owe the Blenkirton fortune. You did not mention Pinar when you were discussing with the rest of us the mystery of the wills."

"I did not know at that time what Pinar had done," said Jacintha, swiftly.

Christopher drew a long breath. At last, at last, a sign of surrender! He dug his hands deep into his pockets.

"You believe that?" she insisted, somewhat to his surprise. "I hope you do believe that, because if you

think that Pinar told me, before I reached here on that morning, that my grandfather was dead, you must also think that I was acting when I was so—so stricken to find my vengeance snatched from me.”

A pulse was throbbing in her throat. Christopher realised once and for all that to her the vendetta had always been a sacred thing. His possible suspicion that she had used it only to heighten her effects was painful to her.

“I believe your emotion was genuine when you heard the old man was out of your reach,” he assured her more gently. “I always have believed that. After all, it is from that belief that I reason you did not kill Uncle Gregory. I have never doubted your innocence of the murder——”

“What have you doubted then?”

He regretted the impulse that had led him towards friendliness. Jacintha’s eyes were narrowed, her poise tense. She looked like a cat about to pounce.

“You doubt that I am in real need of you,” she said very low. “You doubt the destruction of my mind, from which I have implored you to save me. You doubt because it is convenient to doubt.” Her face was white as a waxen flower. “It is not convenient for you to keep your pledged word and save me from my ghosts; and so you doubt whether I am really haunted. I congratulate you, Christopher.”

Christopher took his pipe from his pocket and bit hard upon the stem. Presently—

“You claim the rest of my life,” he said. “I am entitled, surely, to investigate your claim. If I have left it until late in the course of events, it is because only to-day has it been made clear to me that Pinar might have a statement of interest to make regarding her movements on the night of Gregory Blenkiron’s death.”

She moved her head to and fro, as though she sought a means of escape.

“If Pinar had killed him, the vendetta would be satisfied,” she said. “One may strike through the hand of a servant. Why, then, should she and I be tormented as we are?”

Christopher was at a loss. He could not bring himself to retort that if Pinar had killed Gregory Blenkiron, Jacintha was quite capable of bribing her to pretend she had not, and so keep the doubt alive.

In the little silence that ensued his mind went off at a tangent and contemplated the change in his attitude towards the woman he had married. What was she now to him but a jailer whom, if he could outwit, he could escape? His soul sickened within him at this final degradation. . . .

"You do not attempt to deny that, if she did not kill him, she was in his room at the time of his death," he countered.

She swung round suddenly in her chair. He could not read her expression, but vaguely it excited him.

"You are right in questioning me, Christopher," she cried. "I have not told you all. But I have kept back nothing that affects the main issue—nothing. You will see that for yourself. It was only that I feared for Pinar's safety. I feared—Call her, Christopher. Tell her to come here. Ask her what you please. I promise you that she will answer."

CHAPTER XL

THE ULTIMATE RIDDLE

CHRISTOPHER swung across the room to the door and opened it.

"Pinar!" he called.

The woman appeared at once. There was something shadowy about her, for all her bulk. She passed him without a sound and stood before Jacintha, waiting her commands.

"Pinar," said Jacintha, in English, "the Señor wishes to question you about—that night. You will answer him truthfully."

Pinar gave an exclamation. Jacintha continued sombrely:

"The whole truth, mamita. Tell it as you told it to me when I returned to you on the morning they found my grandfather dead."

The woman wheeled upon Christopher. There was neither hostility nor fear in her gaze; rather an appeal to him for help. Her words recurred to him—"If I cannot know I shall die."

"I understand that you also are in doubt, Pinar," he said. "If you will tell me exactly what your part was in Mr. Blenkiron's death, I will try to help you in any way I can."

Pinar nodded. Christopher realised that her understanding of English was greater than her ability to express herself. She stood hesitating, plucking at the corner of her black apron.

"You took the oath of vengeance for my wife when she was a child," Christopher prompted her. "It was a great thing to you that the oath should be kept?"

The dark eyes gleamed, Pinar's hand clenched on the apron.

“ And to her—to the Señora—when her sainted mother speak in her. But when her father speak, no, she is English. She forget.”

“ She means,” put in Jacintha, without looking up, “ that, being only half-Spanish, I had attitudes of mind with which she could not sympathise. That made her fear that, when it came to the point, the English strain in me would make me abandon my purpose and let my grandfather live.”

Again Pinar nodded.

“ The servant and the mistress—it is the same when they kill,” she went on laboriously. “ I think—the Señorita English-Spanish. Pinar all Spanish. I think and think. At last it is one—two—three days and he die, Mistaire Blen-kirron. Then it is one—two days. Then it is one day. *Manana*.”

“ To-morrow,” whispered Jacintha. “ She is speaking of the day before the one on which my grandfather was to die.”

“ The Señorita come home. It is night. She say, ‘ My grandfather know who I am. He has said it. He has sent me away. He know the blood-promise and he know the day of it is to-morrow. But I have my key. I laugh at him and to-morrow all the same I kill him.’ ”

“ Yes,” said Christopher, with an effort. “ Go on.”

“ The Señorita go to sleep at midnight, I think. I think the Señorita sleeps until to-morrow; but it is one—two o’clock. To-morrow is here. The servant may kill for the mistress——”

“ You took your mistress’s key ? ”

“ I take the key, Señor, and open the door down there.” She pointed downwards.

“ The front door, yes. Didn’t you think it might be bolted ? I mean, that there might be a chain—that the key might not be enough ? ”

“ The Señorita speak much to me of the house, Señor. She say many people live there. People come in and out. In the night perhaps you or the Señor your brother wish to enter or leave——”

“ Yes. Quite right. The windows were locked at night, but the front door was never bolted,” Christopher reminded himself in an undertone. “ I see. . . . So you opened the door quietly with the key and went upstairs ? Had you been in the house before ? ”

"Never, Señor. But the Señorita speak much of the house; of her grandfather; of what he do—always the same each day and each night——"

"She means his habits," came in a muffled tone from Jacintha. "We used to go over them again and again, planning. . . ."

"Yes. Did you meet anyone on your way up, Pinar?"

"No person, Señor. I stand outside the door"—she pointed to it—"and I see behind me again stairs and a light burns somewhere. But I hear no person, and no person hear me. I enter and I see in the bed Mistaire Grregorry Blenk-irron. For twenty years, Señor, I have curse this man each night before I sleep, and when at last I see him—*him*—I pray for strength to kill him with my hands!"

Christopher, before that flaming hate, was dumb. . . .

Outside, the rain was beating against the uncurtained window. The small fire on the hearth, the severe green-shaded lights, battled in vain against the coming of the winter's night.

Pinar's raised hands dropped to her side. She shivered.

"The Señorita have told me many times that he take to make him sleep hy-o-scine. I see on the little table there a glass of water and a box. A box of tin; in it many round pastilles. I think, when he wake perhaps he put into the water one hy-o-scine. I think, let him put it in the water, and drink. He drink then also his death. I carry his death here."

She touched the bosom of her gown.

"A knife?" Christopher heard himself ask.

"No, no Señor. The poison. The poison that is secret. It leave no—no——"

"No trace? No mark?"

"No mark, Señor. . . . I put it in the water in the glass and then I wait there."

Pinar moved across the room to the revolving table.

"There is a chair here," she said, pointing to a spot on the other side of the table. "It is a big chair and behind it, on the floor, I wait. It is three o'clock. It is four. He wake."

Christopher moistened his lips.

"He saw you?"

"No, Señor. He see nothing. But I see him. There

is the light of the fire, and I am so near. I look up at him with care and I see his hand take out of the box of tin a pastille——”

“ One ? ”

“ One, Señor.”

“ You can swear to that, Pinar ? ”

“ I see it fall in the glass, Señor. I see the hand and the glass and—so——” The small brown hands indicated a portion of head and shoulders. “ I hear him drink and he say words. I do not understand the words. I wait. . . .”

The wind shook the window. The room was growing cold.

“ And when he is dead, I stand up and look at him and I laugh, but very soft. Then I take the glass and pour on the fire the rest of the water, and then I put a very little clean water in the glass—there is a jug with clean water on the table—and I make very clean the glass and pour the water into my dress here.” Again she indicated her bosom. “ And then I see upon the table letters. Four letters.”

“ Four,” repeated Christopher hoarsely.

“ I read upon them the name Mar-kamm. I know the name. He write to the sainted mother of the Señorita and say Mistaire Blen-kirron he cannot send money. I hate the Señor Markamm ; I open one letter with steam which I make from the still-alive fire. It say when Mistaire Blen-kirron dead, Miss Ara-bella Cave have all. All.”

“ Ah ! ”

“ I read again a letter, and again. I think, what is this ? This man leave all to three persons ? It cannot be ! I read then the last letter. It leave all to you, Señor. I make it so that none may know I have read the letter. I take with me the three letters and I leave the letter that is good for you. The Señorita has spoken of you. I make you rich. I go home and burn the three letters and pray. . . .”

“ You told your mistress what you had done ? ”

“ I say nothing, Señor. She go to kill him. She return. ‘ He is dead, Pinar ! ’ I wait. She has no joy, she has no anger. She say there are more persons who would kill him, the accursed. She say, perhaps the blood-promise is not kept. Perhaps——”

“ But if you put your poison in the glass and saw him drink it ”—Christopher’s voice was harsh with excitement

—"what is there to doubt? He only took one hyoscine tablet himself. He——"

"Perhaps," went on Pinar, dully, "in the glass there is already hy-o-scine. Perhaps already the four persons, or one person or two, or three—have put death in the glass. I also put death. But can Pinar say she has killed?"

The brown hands and wrinkled face were contorted. The ungainly figure shook with the force of its despair. But Christopher was only dimly aware of it.

"Jacinta!" He strode over to her. "If it's only a matter of hyoscine the thing's simple, surely." He was almost stammering in his haste. "You yourself were responsible for the medicines that came into the house. You signed the book for them at the chemist's! You——"

She straightened herself and rested her eyes upon his. In that moment—without reason or knowledge—he knew that she held the winning card.

"Yes, Christopher."

Her eyes were dark as the night outside. Her mouth was a crimson stain in her face. Her lovely hands, curled lightly like the petals of a flower, lay upon the gleaming surface of the table.

"What was the routine in the matter of the hyoscine, Jacinta?" he asked almost tonelessly.

"I ordered a new box as soon as he had finished the old one. He would never have it in the house before. He only took one tablet a night, so we knew exactly when a fresh supply would be required." She paused a tense second or two. Then: "A new box was bought the day before he died."

Christopher found that he was trembling. He gripped the edge of the writing-table. She must not see . . . but she did see. It was her triumph that made her eyes so deep and dark. . . .

"You mean that when Uncle Gregory talked to us all with the hyoscine put ready for us, it was a new lot, just opened?"

"Yes. But not all of it was on the table. It is packed in glass tubes, you know, and he couldn't manage to uncork a tube."

"Well?"

"I used to keep the box in the cupboard and put the contents of the two tubes—twenty tablets—into a little

tin. The tin Pinar describes. You yourself must have seen it many times on his table."

"Where is that tin now?"

She turned her eyes towards the medicine cupboard in the corner.

Christopher went slowly towards it. He felt a vague surprise as Pinar shrank aside against the bed to let him pass. Did he look—formidable? Odd! He felt—he didn't feel anything at all.

He pushed wide the cupboard door. There was the white cardboard box, the lid half-closed. Two tubes had been removed from the neat row of five. There was the tin. Christopher took it out and held it on the palm of his hand.

"Uncle Gregory took one tablet himself," he said, "so that there should be nineteen in this tin. Unless someone removed more of them, after his death."

He did not open the tin. He looked at Jacintha motionless behind the writing-table. She looked at him.

"After our long conference in the ball-room you saw me leave the house, Christopher. If you ask Arabella, as I have done, you will find that within ten minutes of the undertakers leaving this room she was paying her respects to the dead, as she calls it. She was also—she has admitted it—counting the number of hyoscine tablets. I have not questioned Turley or Miriam, but I have no doubt that, before I entered the house again on the day of the funeral, they had all paid similar 'respects.'

"As you say, there should be nineteen tablets, Christopher. Count them. And if you find what Arabella found, be sure the tin has not been tampered with since Marpleton found my grandfather dead.

"Count, Christopher."

Christopher opened the tin with deliberation and turned the tablets out on to his palm.

There were sixteen.

Christopher poured the tablets back into the box. He looked at Jacintha. Their eyes met. From hers he could read nothing save possibly confidence.

He slipped the box into his pocket.

"Well?" she asked.

"This stuff oughtn't to be left lying about. I'm going to lock it up downstairs," he answered.

She laughed as he turned to the door and left the room.

CHAPTER XLI

TICKETS FOR SICILY

“**A**ND so,” concluded Christopher, “the one and only road along which there were sign-posts ends in a blind alley.”

“Yes,” assented Aline.

She was curled upon a cushion before the fire in her “den.” Christopher sat in a deep chair just out of reach of the firelight, a shaded lamp glowing behind him. It was twenty-four hours since he had counted the hyoscine tablets.

He looked round him hungrily at the books, the flowers, the comfortable, cultured litter. Aline’s room, her sanctuary; the very essence of herself. . . . She sat there, hair shining in the firelight, vivid eyes raised to his, hands locked round one knee. He would always remember her so. . . .

“You’re trying to see a way out,” he said. “There isn’t one. We must accept Pinar’s story; for one thing, it clears up the mystery of the will; for another, it explains Jacintha’s ignorance of her grandfather’s death until she was told at Grosvenor Square. And again, it confirms Turley’s statement, and Arabella’s, that no one went down from the bedrooms to Uncle Gregory’s room after we had, in turn, said good night to him.”

“Yes,” said Aline again. “I’m sure Pinar was speaking the truth. She says she saw him—Mr. Blenkiron—put one hyoscine tablet in!”

“One. It’s devastatingly simple, the hyoscine element. Uncle Gregory took one tablet a night. Had done for months. I’ve seen the chemist’s book and compared it with the record Jacintha kept as secretary. It tallies perfectly. On the afternoon the old man had us all into the ball-room there was no hyoscine in the house until

Jacintha brought in a fresh supply. There are ten tablets to a tube, so there were twenty in the little tin by his bedside when we went in to say good night to him.

"When Arabella counted the tablets within half an hour of our second conference in the ballroom, on the morning after his death, there ought to have been nineteen tablets if Uncle Gregory took one during the night. There were actually sixteen. Arabella tells me she counted them out of sheer bewilderment, superstitious terror, for she had made no inquiries as to the state of the supply the night before. She says emphatically that there were sixteen, not nineteen."

"What about Mrs. Barnaby and your brother?"

"They say they asked discreet questions of Marpleton and the chemist—separately, of course; neither of them confessed their investigations to the other or to Araby. They came by the obvious stages to Jacintha's record, and the final conclusion that there should be nineteen tablets left. They each counted, as Araby did, and I did yesterday, and found sixteen."

"Did anyone count them the night before and know for certain that there were twenty there?"

"No. Miriam handled them in a high state of nerves and got the impression that there were hundreds and hundreds of them. Arabella and Turley kept their eyes off the tin altogether. So did I." He paused a moment. "It is perfectly possible that Jacintha put three tablets aside out of the twenty when arranging the fresh supply in the tin. In my mind, when we were going into the matter yesterday morning, I accused her of having done that. She has an uncanny trick of reading one's thoughts—she pointed out to me that she knew nothing of Uncle Gregory's temptation of us all and the value of the hyoscine until *after* his death. Why should she, then, have taken the three tablets the night before, when she saw him for the last time? It would be like stealing the key of a door that hasn't yet been fitted into a house."

Aline sighed.

"She might have taken three tablets for other reasons than that of confusing you. Christopher, three is a fatal dose. She might have liked the idea of keeping death handy. After all, she was going to commit murder."

Christopher made an impatient movement.

"Oh, I know! It's as possible as you like that she did do that—that there weren't twenty tablets in the tin when they were put by Uncle Gregory's side. But Jacintha swears there were, and we can't prove otherwise. That leaves Pinar and three other people—two—or one, involved in Uncle Gregory's death. At any rate not Pinar alone. Hence her despair over the unfulfilled vendetta. Hence Jacintha's claim on me to push Uncle Gregory out of her mind. Hence us."

There was a long pause. Aline's hands were straining at her knee. She had not taken her eyes from him; as though she too were looking her fill. . . .

"That poor Pinar!" she said, presently. "So alone, and so unhappy! I can understand her a little, can't you? It would be easier for her to bear if she had tried to satisfy the feud, and failed; it's the uncertainty that's torturing her, not knowing whether Mr. Blenkiron died by her hand or whether she only added her poison to what was already a fatal draught. . . . It's all fantastic when you try to put it into words! It sounds so cheap, so silly, almost. And yet, when you are aware of it in your mind only, it's so frighteningly real."

"It's real enough when you see the woman," said Christopher, grimly. "She scuttled away as I was counting the tablets. According to Jacintha, she doesn't grasp the hyoscine problem at all; she thinks the 'others' who wanted to kill Gregory Blenkiron used some secret concoction, as she herself did. She saw him take one pastille, as she calls it, out of the tin, but she looks on that as some sort of medicine, of no account in the dilemma. Jacintha, quite wisely, hasn't attempted to explain. . . . I think Pinar will kill herself."

"Oh, Christopher! No!" Aline's eyes were wide with dismay. "You must stop her—help her. If we could make her like life——"

"Child, how can we? She demands a proof we would give our own souls for—almost."

Her eyes yearned over him

"The blind alley," she whispered.

Christopher leant forward suddenly.

"A sign from you," he told her violently, "and all this shall be just—words. Jacintha's need of me may be morally indisputable; I'm prepared to throw my morality

overboard and let her go on needing me. I'm not afraid of sinning."

"Nor I!" Her voice rose clear and strong above his. "Nor I, Christopher. But I'm afraid of—having sinned."

He rose, pacing the room, throwing his words down at her as she sat huddled on the floor.

"You understand all it means—this giving her the benefit of the doubt and taking her away to Sicily. My work will no longer count—except as a social asset. I shall lose touch with thought; very slowly but very surely I shall find it hard to remember exactly why you and I gave each other up. I shall drift out of my hostility towards her into indifference. Sicily will seem delightfully little trouble. Then gradually I shall realise that she is beautiful and well-disposed towards me. . . . You're so young, Aline, yet I can speak to you like this, I can hurt you as I shrink from hurting myself, and know you won't break under it."

She was very white and quiet.

"Because while you're saying what you are going to lose, I'm thinking of what she'll gain. You'll not let her be haunted any more by her memories and her doubts. She's wondered and wondered as Pinar has; the doubt has sapped her strength; and you promised her help when you married her. . . . I'm thinking how strong and happy you'll make her, and how in the end she'll consider blood-feuds rather childish things. . . ."

The brave voice broke. The shining head sank lower and lower till a loose strand touched his foot as he stood over her.

"Aline—my little love—don't—don't—— Look here, I bought these to-day—the tickets and things for Sicily—I'll burn them. I won't go. I can't! You and I together is light; the other's a dark web that catches you back whenever you break away——"

Her hand had crept up to his knee, the lightest touch, but it shook him to the depths.

"Aline——"

He swept her up to him, kissing her lips and hair and throat. His stammering passion besought her. Life was in her keeping and she withheld it. He crushed her to him so that she cried out against the imprisonment of his arms.

"Christopher, let me go! My dear, she must come first. Don't let's look back on greed and meanness. Let's celebrate our love by giving you to her, as only you can give——"

"And you to Stephen! Oh God, Aline!"

She lay a dead weight against his shoulder. His kisses had closed her eyes and parted her lips and brought the dancing, leaping blood to her cheeks and brow. . . .

"I'll carry you away, like this," he muttered, "out of the winter into warmth and sunshine——"

"The sun wouldn't shine for us, Christopher!"

"We'll go into all the odd corners of the world and out again. We'll be free."

"We haven't the right. Let me go!"

"No, I can't. I simply can't. It's too much to ask. Don't you know it's too much?"

But she had torn herself away. She was no longer in his arms. He had lost her.

"Good-bye, Christopher."

She turned and laid her arm along the mantelshelf, her face in the crook of her elbow. His hands went out to gather her back to him; then they dropped.

Something was burning behind his eyes.

"Good-bye, Aline."

How slender she was, and straight! All gold and white. . . .

He went away very quickly from the room and out of her home. The tickets to Sicily were still in his hand.

CHAPTER XLII

THE REVOLVING TABLE

AT the Gulverbury Hotel, Christopher was informed that Mrs. Cordant had not yet returned. There was a note for him. He read it and learnt that she was spending the night at the Grosvenor Square house. In memory he saw the warm, barbaric rooms that she had made ready there.

To go straight to them from Aline's white and golden stillness would be sacrilege. . . . Yet, in the end, however much he dallied, he must go. . . .

He walked quickly, welcoming the cold and damp. The throb of his pulses was dying down. He was beginning not to feel very much. Good! If it would only last he might hope to regret and remember nothing until the Sicilian moonlight was there to drug all pain with beauty. Christopher walked faster. It was beginning to drizzle. How long winter lasted! In Sicily it would be like an English spring. Where would they go when Taormina grew too hot? He supposed Jacintha would decide.

His mind went to the Scarfield Institute. Cragg would take command there. It was a good thing that he had never made public the fact that he was giving his inheritance to his work. He had spoken in a general way of the possibility of extension, new equipment, and new buildings, and so on, and then, afterwards, when he had made half his money over to Jacintha, he had had to reconstruct. He had been vague. Now, of course, the amount he could make over to the Institute would be again cut in half, since he could not live on Jacintha.

Strange, damnably strange, the fate of the Blenkiron million! Three-quarters of it in Prade's pocket. The remaining quarter bringing ease to himself, who had no love of it, and to Jacintha, who had never absolutely established her right to it.

He ran up the steps of the Blenkiron house and let himself in. A light burned foggily in the hall ; there was no fire. The secretary's room also was dark and cold. Christopher looked round him, ruminating. Jacintha could drop all that nonsense now about starting a career in the City and using this place as a spring-board. Probably she would offer the whole of the house, excepting only that barbaric suite upstairs, to Arabella and Miriam and Stephen. She would go to Sicily, to sunshine and languor and wealth, and she would leave them all imprisoned in their doubt, like poor flies in the web. They would live on there very poorly (unless Sir Rowland Prade were quixotic) in a very undefined position, slipping furtively in and out of the room that had been Uncle Gregory's, in which they would keep everything the same. Turley would snarl through the years, and Miriam sneer, and Arabella—Aline said Arabella had changed, but change did not come so easily as that. Arabella would slip back and, if she no longer hated the Prades, she would watch Miriam. . . .

Stephen alone of the four would be liberated ; because Aline had promised to marry him. He would go out of the house of destruction into hope and re-creation, into a white and gold ecstasy that would be his. . . .

Christopher found himself in the upper hall facing Uncle Gregory's bedroom. He heard voices coming from behind the door. He knocked and then, as footsteps approached inside, opened the door and went in.

Pinar, stopped short on her way to open the door, was standing uncertainly in the middle of the room. Christopher looked past her.

In the bed that had been Gregory Blenkiron's lay Jacintha, propped up by pillows as Gregory used to be, facing an uncurtained window, as he had liked to do. By her side was the revolving table—even as Christopher's eyes found it, it swung gently round, exposing the clock in its fluted partition. Even so had Gregory Blenkiron lain, with the clock ticking the minutes gently away, almost under his hand.

A furious disgust rose in Christopher. That quick turn of the table infuriated him. In the first fraction of a second in which she had seen him she had turned the table deftly so that even the clock should be in its traditional place ; she slid the last " prop " into place. . . .

"Why all this?" Christopher heard himself ask, expressionless through the very goad of his exasperation.

"Leave us, Pinar."

Pinar had retreated to the further side of the revolving table. Her hands moved and there was the "chink" of a glass grating on a saucer.

"We were having hot wine," said Jacintha. "Pinar spices wine deliciously. Will you have some, Christopher?"

"No thank you."

Pinar lingered. Christopher saw her fingers clench round the glass she held. Her small eyes clung to Jacintha's.

"You can come back in a minute," Jacintha told her impatiently. "I do not expect the Señor will stay long. Leave your wine and return. . . ."

The woman shook her head and made for the door; the glass still rattled against the saucer as though her hand was trembling. At the door she put it down abruptly upon a side table and turned back to the bed.

"Oh, Pinar!"

Jacintha's protest was swept away by a rush of words. Christopher, who knew no Spanish, understood without effort the passionate tenderness that lay behind the strange, liquid sounds.

"Yes, yes, mamita," nodded Jacintha. "Good night. Good night." She patted the wrinkled cheek with a hand which Pinar seized and kissed and held in her bosom. Then—

"Adios, Señor."

"Good night, Pinar," returned Christopher, uncomfortably. The door closed upon her.

She had wished him farewell. A memory stirred in Christopher's brain. "*Good night, Uncle Gregory.*" "*Good-bye, Christopher.*"

He took a step in the direction in which she had gone; then, under Jacintha's fathomless scrutiny, he returned to the foot of the bed.

"She is very devoted to you, Jacintha."

"Yes."

"I suppose you'll do what you can to prevent her taking her life? She suggests to me, very strongly, that she is on the verge of doing so."

"She may want to; I think she does. I've done the obvious things to stop her; thrown away her little dagger

and put the rest of the 'poison-that-leaves-no-trace' upon the fire."

"What poison is it?"

"She distils it from a hill-plant—I don't know the English name, if there is one. Pinar was shown the method by her grandmother. It's a sort of family secret. She can't possibly get hold of any more so long as she remains in England.

"It is kind of you to be concerned about her, Christopher."

The tone said that the concern was ill-placed. The languid, folded hands said that suffering and despair was nearer home than in the soul of an old Spanish peasant. Christopher leant against the foot of the bed and noted the drooping lids and streaming hair.

Pose! Every fibre of him recoiled from the artificiality of her. Then in the recesses of his brain, a voice as clear as Aline's said: "Not proven, not proven. Give her the benefit of the doubt."

Her slow words came to him.

"You are scorning me, Christopher. I know it, but I can't help it. I always told you that without you I should be sucked under. I can't sleep properly, I haven't slept for nights. Something had driven me here to lie where he lay, with the light there and the clock here and everything as he used to have it. Perhaps here I shall sleep and dream. Perhaps the truth will come to me in a vision. I did not want you to know I was doing this, but I had to leave a note to say where I was."

Christopher stared before him. "Lies, lies!" cried his instinct; "Not proven," replied his reason. He kept his eyes on the wall.

"I am not going to continue to withhold any help I can give, Jacintha. I—there is no reason for us to postpone a decision as to our personal life. If you still wish it, I will come to Sicily to-morrow."

She drew a breath so deep and quick that it was almost a moan. It echoed in his brain, mocking his words.

"I am ready to absorb myself in the task of clearing your mind of all these horrors. My work will be—a hobby. We shall have plenty of money, no responsibilities, and the rest of our lives to spend."

"What about——"

"Aline? She will probably marry Stephen."

The silence held so long that he removed his gaze from

the wall and looked at her. Her pallor startled him ; even her lips had lost their life. Her eyes were closed.

He knew that when they opened they would be lustrous with her triumph. He could not bear it. He turned away and stared out of the higher window into the winter night.

"*Christopher !*"

He forced himself back to her. She was leaning forward, a hand flung out to him. The laces at her throat fell aside and showed the ivory curve of her breast. Her lips were crimson, now, even her hair a-gleam. And in her eyes was triumph, stark and unashamed.

"Oh, Christopher, my husband ! *Mine !* And I began to fear I had lost you. You and I in Sicily. Do you remember the moonlight on the hills ? Let us go soon—soon—soon."

He had taken her hand. The scent of her was clinging about him, frail yet strong, as a gossamer web.

"We'll go as soon as we've got our passports. I got the tickets to-day."

Her laughter trembled in her throat, like a bird's song.

"You want to go, Christopher ! You too, you have come to dream of the Sicilian nights. You will give yourself up to our life, our love ; you will forget all the grim, difficult things."

"Yes," he agreed. "I shall forget."

He would forget in time how to handle the grim, difficult things ; then how to want to handle them. . . . Her face was close to his.

"Take me away from this house to-morrow, Christopher."

"Now, if you like."

"No, no, not to-night. I'm too tired to dress again."

"Sleep in the suite next door, in that bedroom you've furnished. I'll carry you there, if you like. I'm going on to the Institute. There's a lot to put in order ; it'll be an all-night job."

"No, I shall stay here. If I dream of him—of my grandfather—I shall tell him you are stronger than he can ever be."

She slipped back against her pillows. Christopher went to the door.

"Till to-morrow," he said quietly.

"Till to-morrow. No, don't turn the light out. I want to drink my wine, it's still quite hot."

Over the rim of the glass her triumphant gaze followed him as he left the room.

CHAPTER XLIII

THE CHEAT

IN the pale half-light of a winter dawn, Christopher started to sudden wakefulness and stared at the haggard face of Pinar. She was so haggard that there came to him for one moment a shivering superstitious fancy. It was the wrinkles! No, it was more than the wrinkles—and why had she burst into his room? He remembered that she slept at Blenkiron's house.

"What on earth's the matter, Pinar?"

"The Señora. Come quick. Quick. The Señora." The woman's words caught on her breath. She stood panting, glaring a menace at his slothfulness.

"The Señora is dead. Come, Señor. Quick!"

"Nonsense!" snapped Christopher fiercely, as the woman muttered in Spanish and crossed herself. "Get out of my room and I will come with you. Go downstairs and order a taxi—you understand—a motor-cab—and wait in it until I come. I'll be with you in five minutes."

"The Señora is dead." Wild nonsense! He would try to get Jacintha to sack that Spanish woman. How could Jacintha possibly be dead unless the roof had fallen on her? He would bathe and shave afterwards. He wrote Dr. Stanton's name and address in his notebook and tore out the leaf as he hurried downstairs. The night clerk was still on duty. Christopher handed him the slip of paper.

"Phone Dr. Stanton of this address at once, please, and ask him to come at once to the late Mr. Blenkiron's house in Grosvenor Square."

"Very good, sir."

Pinar was waiting in the taxi as he had bidden. The woman was in a strange state, he noticed. She made no move as he entered. Her normal servility had vanished. She seemed to ignore him.

"Now what does all this mean, Pinar? Try to tell me what is the matter with your mistress."

There came no answer.

"You can understand what I am saying, Pinar?"

"The Señora is dead," said Pinar tonelessly.

Christopher stifled an exclamation. He was about to question Pinar when he pulled himself up with the sudden wonder why his imagination utterly refused to envisage the possibility of Jacintha being dead. Pinar, after all, was not an imbecile. She would not mistake a fainting-fit or a seizure for death. Why, then, suppose that she was lying or even deceiving herself? Why not take the simpler course of assuming that Jacintha was dead? Was it that he dared not believe Jacintha dead lest he damn his manhood by rejoicing?

No, he had enough moral strength to face that situation. If Jacintha really were dead a grim problem of three lives would be mercifully solved. If Jacintha were indeed dead he would not be afraid to think of Aline in the moment of that knowledge. Yet—that Jacintha should die just then—it was so amazingly improbable that he could not believe it.

Doctor Stanton was turning the corner of the square as the taxi drew up.

"Go and tell your mistress that Doctor Stanton is coming," ordered Christopher.

"The Señora is dead," said Pinar, and entered the house as Christopher opened the door with his latch-key.

"Doctor! My wife and her maid slept here last night. I was at the Gulverbury. Her Spanish maid came and told me she was dead. It's probably nonsense. Come and see."

Doctor Stanton looked at him with faint suspicion, and Christopher was conscious that his explanation sounded incoherent, that his voice held excitement.

"Very extraordinary!" said Doctor Stanton, as he let Christopher hurry him into the house. "Have you any idea——?"

"None whatever!" They were striding abreast up the broad staircase.

"In *his* room!" said Christopher.

"Very extraordinary!" muttered Doctor Stanton again. "In—oh, well, we shall soon see. Don't alarm yourself needlessly, Mr. Cordant."

"I'll come with you, if I may. No, I'll stay here. Come out as soon as you can."

Christopher, alone in the upper hall, pulled out his watch with the fanciful determination to see how long it would take Stanton to tell him whether Jacintha were dead or not. Twice he thought that the second hand had stopped. He held the watch to his ear and it ticked.

"According to this watch he has been in there sixty seconds," said Christopher, aloud.

According to the watch, Doctor Stanton had been in there a little more than ninety seconds when he came out, shut the door behind him and kept his hold on the handle, looking sideways and downways at nothing.

"Well? Well?"

Doctor Stanton insinuated a handshake.

"Mr. Cordant, I am very, very sorry for you," he said. "Your servant spoke the truth."

Christopher tried to speak and failed; tried again and made a foolish croaking sound. Then—

"Are you sure—I beg your pardon—I mean—it's almost absurd. Has my wife been murdered? Why should she die? She was no more likely to die than——"

"I beg you to be firm with yourself," said Dr. Stanton, still with that faint suspicion in his tone. "Hold yourself on a firm rein. Some incomprehensible tragedy has descended upon this house—in the *same* room."

"Doctor Stanton, I am not prostrated with shock. I have not had time to feel any shock. It's my brain and not my feelings. I just can't grasp the fact. How did she die?"

"That, I am afraid, will have to be investigated by the Coroner."

"Coroner! Has she been knifed?"

"Oh dear, no! There is no mark of violence."

"Poisoned?"

"I really cannot say. It is not in my power to make an examination. The Coroner——"

"Between you and me—how do you guess it happened? It shall go no further. It can't have been natural."

Doctor Stanton hesitated.

"You have suggested poison. It might be that. . . . I tell you I can't give an opinion. . . . It might be an overdose of a sleeping-draught. I can't tell. I can only offer you my heartfelt sympathy."

Christopher murmured something. He did not know what. He watched Doctor Stanton's suspicious back disappear down the stairs. When it had turned the bend, he went in to Jacintha.

Stanton had removed the pillows. They lay somewhere on the floor, a blurr of white on the dark polish. By the bed the revolving table still held the clock and the house-telephone and the lamp. The glass that had held the wine had gone ; had Stanton taken it ? Or Pinar ?

Christopher leant against the foot of the bed as he had leant some ten hours ago.

The eyes that had held triumph were hidden now ; the long lashes cast slumbrous shadows ; the arched eyebrows asked a question ; the brow above gave smooth answer.

Only the lips, full, downward curving, proclaimed a passionate rebellion to the end. . . .

A sound at his side. Pinar had thrown herself across the foot of the bed, rocking and writhing in a tearless agony. Christopher touched her upon the shoulder.

"How—why did she die, Pinar ?"

He received no answer. For a moment he stood frowning over the tortured frame, then, impulsively, he picked the woman up and carried her away.

He laid her on a couch in one of the rooms of Jacintha's creating. Against the clash of colour, the small, dark-clad figure looked grotesque.

"Pinar——"

Someone knocked at the door. It was Turley. Behind him Marpleton hovered, gaunt and shocked. Turley also looked thoroughly frightened.

"My dear chap—my dear Chris—only just heard. Absolutely appalled. I——" He stopped, caught Christopher's eye, averted his own, and shuffled his feet.

"If there's anything I can do," he managed to add, "I shall be at my club. Thought I'd better clear out. You don't want a crowd."

After Turley, there was Marpleton to be spoken to. Christopher detected in him also that suspicious alarm. It left him quite unmoved. They thought he'd poisoned Jacintha. It didn't matter. Aline would know he hadn't.

Aline. . . .

These hurried, early hours widened into a morning of

confused activities. Officials came to remove the body for the autopsy. Different groups of officials came to ask different groups of questions. Later the blur was cleared by the very definite conclusion that Jacintha must have been murdered or she must have committed suicide.

He rang the bell and told Marpleton to bring Pinar to the room that was still called "the secretary's." Pinar kept him waiting for a quarter of an hour. He had intended to protest, but when he saw her, haggard as when he had seen her in his room at the Gulverbury, he changed his mind.

"You are ill, Pinar. I think I had better send for a doctor."

"The Señor is kind, and I am ill; but the doctor cannot heal me."

Christopher felt a sense of helplessness. A Spanish peasant presented difficulties in psychology that might well prove too much for him.

"The doctor has already tried to heal me when he tried to bring the Señora to life."

"Yes, yes, Pinar! I know you were very fond of your mistress, but you mustn't give way to grief, you know. It will do her no good and can only harm yourself."

"The Señor says it. But the Señora is dead and it is I who have killed her."

Christopher paused in the act of lighting his pipe. The match burned down to his fingers. Was the woman being figurative—or literal?

"What do you mean, Pinar? It is very wrong to talk like that. What do you mean when you say that you killed the Señora?"

"I killed the Señora, but it was not my hand that slew her or assuredly it would wither. Did not the hand of Gorgio wither who slew his master's son?"

The language difficulty! A hopeless mixture of metaphor and fact. He would try a little longer and then send for an interpreter. There were obvious difficulties in the way of employing an interpreter.

"How did you kill the Señora?"

"By desiring to kill myself."

If that had any real meaning at all it meant that Jacintha had killed herself at the shock of learning that Pinar had found a way of committing suicide. Sheer gibberish!

"The Señor will be patient and learn?"

"Yes, Pinar. Tell me what you wish me to know."

"When the Señora return to me on that morning and say 'Pinar, we know not if the blood-feud has been kept,' I weep. I weep and pray, Señor. And the Señora say she will discover the truth for me, and I wait and I wait. And always she say she know not yet; she count the medicine of Mis-taire Blen-kirron, and the Señor count and the other señoras and the Señor Cave count. But what is all this to Pinar? This hy-o-scine is no matter to the blood-feud Pinar have not kept. And the Señora has no patience. She say, 'Pinar, you cannot understand. If ever I discover if you killed him, I will tell you. But I fear that he died also of the poison of others. I fear the oath is broken.' So she say, the Señora, the flower. She is English-Spanish. She weep not because the oath is broken——"

"Ah!"

"No, Señor, she weeps not. She wish only the Señor and his love. It is Pinar who weeps. It is Pinar who will kill herself because the oath is broken."

"Go on."

"Last night, before the Señor come, we drink wine. The Señora like it so, hot, with herbs. I think, I will not live. I put in the wine I will drink a poison."

Christopher was rigid.

"In *your* wine?"

"In mine, Señor. I wish to die by the Señora's side. And then the Señor enter and I go away—alone—And I drink . . . And I lie and wait for death. It comes not. All the night I wait, and then on a fear I go to see the Señora and she is—she——"

The harsh voice broke and ceased. Pinar's clenched hands beat her head.

"You put that poison in your wine last night," said Christopher, speaking through the thud of muffled hammers. "And then I came into the room . . . That revolving table . . . I saw it turn; you didn't. Oh, my God, how horrible! You took the wine you'd poured for her, and left her yours."

"The Señor has spoken," groaned Pinar. "It is the hand of Fate. An evil spirit turns the table so that the poison is before the Señora. An evil spirit. . . ."

"No. She was setting the stage; giving the last touch." He was speaking to himself. "Acting, acting! Not proven. . . . No, not proven. And we shall never know, now."

He brooded, his mind scanning every remembered detail of the scene that had followed that setting of the stage. They had talked first of Pinar. Christopher's consciousness came back to the forlorn woman before him. Jacintha had said that she had done what she could to keep death from Pinar.

"Where did you get the poison?" he asked. "The Señora told me she had taken from you the 'poison-that-leaves-no-mark' and burnt it."

The dull eyes regarded him.

"She take it? Yes, that may be so, Señor. I look for it and I cannot find it. I look and look and I ask the Señora and she say she know not. I look and look and then I think perhaps she hide it from Pinar. I open with my key the box where the dress of her sainted mother lie——"

"Did you take the Señora's key?"

"No, Señor. I have a key that fit. The Señora know not that. And in the dress I find the poison. I take it back and say nothing."

"Odd!" muttered Christopher. "I remember distinctly that she said she'd burnt it. You're sure it was your poison, Pinar?"

"It was in blue paper, Señor, as was the poison I put in the medicine water of Mr. Blen-kirron. I bring from Spain the two little blue papers and in each the poison."

"What was it like, the stuff itself?"

"White, Señor. A white, fine powder. . . . The Señor will now kill me? Or perhaps tell the executioner?"

Christopher abandoned the riddle for the moment. There was the practical problem of Pinar. In the course of attempting suicide she had caused death to another. Quite probably a lawyer would turn that into manslaughter.

"Have you any relations in Spain, Pinar?"

"Yes, Señor, a brother."

"When this is over you must go to him. I will send you there and see that you and he live comfortably. But listen to me first. The—er—executioner will not touch you. If you tell the police or anyone else what you have

just told me they will put you in prison for a number of years. I don't know how many. When you appear before the—court of inquiry—tell no lies. But just say that you prepared hot wine for your mistress. Say nothing of the poison. Do you understand ? ”

“ I understand, Señor. But, Señor, I cannot live——”

“ Will you promise me not to kill yourself until you have spoken to me about it again ? ”

“ I promise, Señor.”

There were advantages in the Spanish peasant point of view, thought Christopher. The unquestioning obedience would save a lot of trouble and a stupid miscarriage of justice. If they were to send Pinar to prison, the Lord Chief Justice himself could never convince her that she was being punished for attempting to take her own life.

So much for Pinar ! Back to the fact that Jacintha was dead. He must tell Aline. No, she would read about it in the papers. He let the thought of Aline, and Jacintha's death, soak in so that presently, with a mind cleared of self-suspicion, he was able to contemplate the tragedy of Jacintha.

Paradox on paradox—he would grieve for Jacintha ! She had fascinated him until she had taught him to fear her. . . . There was no getting over the fact that he had proudly stooped to raise her from the quagmire of superstition. He had failed—the failure was the more complete in that it had driven him to the desperate device of surrendering his essential self and going to Taormina.

And it had all ended with a poison-cup and a revolving table, as it had begun. She had flashed into the lives of the four of them, of Turley and Arabella and Miriam and himself, and now all that was left of her was the original riddle. By the riddle of Blenkiron's death would Blenkiron's granddaughter alone live in their memory.

CHAPTER XLIV

A RIDER TO THE VERDICT

CCHRISTOPHER entered the coroner's court with a certain illogical equanimity. There was a grim appropriateness in the sordid associations of the court. Here in the coroner's court was the end of his romance, the final comment upon the sexual egotism that had stampeded him into the belief that he was strong enough to help Jacintha. How much of that humiliating tragedy would be dragged out of him in the witness-box before they would believe that the remains of Jacintha were better buried without more teasing of the problem of her?

The coroner entered, and the inquest formally opened. He looked round the court and then towards the door. It was very decent of Turley and Arabella and Miriam to keep away, he thought. Miriam, he supposed, would be pleased. She had always particularly detested Jacintha. It did not matter.

His equanimity was shattered by the report of the autopsy, which ascribed the fact of death to poisoning by an excessive dose of hyoscine.

Hyoscine!

His brain wrote the word in letters of spluttering fire. Presently they would ask him what he knew about the manner of Jacintha's death. So far they knew only that she had died of hyoscine. . . .

He forced his attention back to the proceedings of the Court. Pinar, with the aid of an interpreter, was telling a stilted and commonplace tale of the answering of bells, the changes of dress, and domestic trivialities. The woman was strangely unflustered—she was obeying orders. She wept as she told of finding her mistress dead. Then came the monotonous details of her coming to rouse him at

the Gulverbury Hotel. His thoughts flew off to wrestle with the problem of the hyoscine.

The usher was calling his name now. He stepped forward to the witness-box. He must compose himself.

He stopped short in the mumble of taking the oath and the clerk mumbled a repetition. If she had taken hyoscine how did Pinar's yarn fit in about the reclaiming of the Spanish poison? He must try and work it out. They were asking him formal questions, and then he was telling them how he had hurried from the Gulverbury Hotel to the house in Grosvenor Square.

"Was there any reason that you know of that could conceivably lead your wife to wish to take her own life?"

"None."

"Were you living apart?"

"No. It was a mere whim of hers to sleep in that house on that night. My wife used to think a good deal about her grandfather who died recently in that room. She—she was a little morbid on the subject. I did not share her feelings. Although I tried to discourage the line of thought, I did not attempt to prevent her doing as she wished."

"When you saw her at ten o'clock—did she strike you as being particularly morbid then?"

"On the contrary! She was very happy. I should explain that she has not been very well in London nor very contented. She wanted me to take her back to Sicily for a prolonged stay. I only succeeded in making the necessary arrangements at a late hour yesterday. I went at once to the house because I wanted to lose no time in telling her that I had actually bought the tickets for Taormina and written to the hotel. I thought it would please her, and it did please her. I think too that the news dispelled her morbidity. For she spoke of her grandfather with unusual balance, and said that she would now be able to forget him."

"As a scientist, you are familiar with the properties of hyoscine?"

"Yes."

There was a faint fluttering in the court and Christopher did not miss its significance. Everyone was reflecting that if he had wanted to kill his wife he would have had more sense than to do it in such a manner as would be quite certain to be traced.

Trivial questions were being put to him, questions that led nowhere. He answered them mechanically, his brain working at top speed, remembering, weighing.

Aline and he had spoken of the possibility of Jacintha having taken those three missing tablets before Gregory Blenkiron's death. Aline had said, "After all, she was going to commit murder. She might have wanted to have death handy." That poison in the blue paper Pinar had found in the folds of the Spanish dress—Jacintha could have put Pinar's poison on the fire and used the paper for her stolen hyoscine. And she had powdered it——"

"Have you any idea how the deceased obtained the hyoscine?"

"She might have taken it from Mr. Blenkiron's cupboard while he was alive. He always had a supply, and it was one of her duties to see it was put ready for him at night."

"What happened to the hyoscine after his death. Did it remain in the house?"

"Yes, sir. None of us thought anything about it, and it was left in the medicine cupboard in his room."

"How much was there?"

"Almost a whole box, sir."

"Left unprotected—enough hyoscine to kill twenty men!" exclaimed the coroner. "I have always said that the law should require the return of dangerous medicines after the death of a patient."

"It was left unprotected until three days ago, sir," said Christopher. "I was in the room with my wife and we talked of the circumstances of Mr. Blenkiron's death. I then remembered the hyoscine and took it out of the medicine cupboard. I locked the box in a small safe in a room that used to be called the secretary's room."

The coroner considered the information.

"You say that your wife was at one time secretary to Mr. Blenkiron. Had she a key of that safe?"

"Yes, sir. I suggest that we can find out by going to the safe whether she used the key to get the hyoscine. If the box is not there she must have taken it. Equally, if the box is there, it must contain the number of tablets it did when I locked it away. If there are fewer than that number we shall know that she must have taken the difference."

"That is quite useless," snapped the coroner. "If you

find the same number of tablets there, what will it prove? Not that your wife did not meet her death through your carelessness! Simply that she might have taken the tablets on any one of her visits to the house after Mr. Blenkiron's death! We need inquire no further into this point, Mr. Cordant. You were the owner of the house. From the moment of Mr. Blenkiron's death yours was the voice of authority. With a scientist's knowledge of the properties of this dangerous drug you left large quantities of it lying unprotected and at the same time allowed your wife, whom you admit to have been of a morbid temperament, to roam about the house at will. . . . You may stand down."

Christopher resumed his seat in the well of the court in a state bordering upon exasperation. In a sense the coroner's outburst had been justified from the coroner's point of view. Yet the whole conception was ludicrously wrong. Arabella for one could prove that there had been sixteen loose tablets in the box immediately after Blenkiron's death—before Jacintha could have penetrated to the room. Therefore it did matter most tremendously now many tablets there were in the box at the present moment. The coroner was addressing the jury.

"You heard Mr. Cordant say that he knows how many tablets were in the box. That number proves and can prove nothing. We can very easily find out when the box was bought. That again can prove nothing. Before we can make deductions from the date of the buying of the box we must know whether Mr. Blenkiron had any other tablets in the house—whether the last few tablets from the previous box were added to the new one. . . . The fact remains that there was this supply of hyoscine. . . ."

Christopher was not listening. Jacintha had died of hyoscine. She had died of the three tablets with which she had intended to cheat the police after she had killed her grandfather.

"We do not know. This woman of morbid tendencies, sleeping in the very room wherein her grandfather had recently died, may have administered some of this hyoscine to herself in order to procure sleep. How easy for a layman to take an overdose. . . ."

Jacintha had not killed her grandfather, and the powdered hyoscine had remained in her possession until Pinar

had found it and tried to use it upon herself. And then Jacintha, setting the stage for her pretence of doubt, had made a table revolve. . . .

The foreman of the jury was telling the coroner that Jacintha had intended to take a sleeping-draught and had taken an overdose. The foreman was mumbling something uncomplimentary to Mr. Cordant.

"That amounts to a verdict of 'Death by Misadventure,'" said the coroner, "with a rider censuring the husband for culpable carelessness—a verdict with which I am in hearty agreement."

Christopher gathered that he left the court with a stain on his character. It was all very silly. . . . He would get at the thing that mattered in a minute. Taxis were nearly as slow as the old horse-cabs.

Go back over it carefully! Pinar thought that she had put some Spanish powder into the wine. She had really put powdered hyoscine. You cannot walk into a shop and buy hyoscine. You must have a doctor's prescription. Jacintha could never have obtained a prescription herself for hyoscine. Therefore she must have obtained it from Blenkiron's supply. And she must have powdered it.

She did not obtain it from Blenkiron after Blenkiron's death. Arabella had proved that. Therefore she obtained it before Blenkiron's death. As Aline had said, that was possible.

The box had been bought on the day before Blenkiron's death. Two tubes had been opened and the tablets scattered.

That afternoon, when he and Turley and Arabella had been waiting in the hall for Uncle Gregory—Jacintha had passed them then, he remembered, and she had been carrying something. She could have slipped out the three tablets then.

The taxi pulled up. He paid the man and entered the house.

The whole theory could be shattered or confirmed beyond doubt by the number of tablets remaining in the box.

He pulled out his keys as he hurried into the secretary's room.

If there were fewer than sixteen loose tablets it would mean that Jacintha had taken them from the box on the night of her death to commit a capricious suicide. If there were sixteen it would mean——

It would mean that Arabella, Turley, Miriam had none of them even tried to kill Uncle Gregory. It would mean that Jacintha had known of their innocence from the first. It would mean that she had cheated.

He unlocked the safe and found the box ; opened it and turned out the contents.

Sixteen !

Christopher let the tablets fall one by one, back into the box.

The facts whirled and scurried, then bowed each other into place with a musty courtliness that gave them proportion. . . .

Fate was a monster stylist who never mixed periods. The first link in the chain of disaster had been a mediæval blood-feud which had inspired Gregory Blenkiron's pantomime of death. And at last a poison-cup and a revolving table had forced from death a secret that life would have withheld.

CHAPTER XLV

“ MORBID VENDETTA—NONSENSE ”

A VAGUE number of days later Christopher found himself again in the deep chair in the room that had spoken to him of home. Aline, curled before the fire, let his gaze rest in her eyes.

“ I didn’t even make her happy, Aline, save for a few days, as any other man could have made her happy. Her death hurts in a personal way, too. She paid me the devastating honour of loving me. And all the time she was a cheat. She let us believe that one of the four of us might have put hyoscine in his glass even when she knew the doubt was destroying us. She let Pinar believe the same thing, even when she knew the doubt was driving her to death.”

“ You are quite sure there is no mistake, Christopher ? ”

“ There can’t be. Those three missing tablets were taken by Jacintha from the box some twelve hours before Gregory Blenkiron died. One tablet was used by the old man himself that night—dropped into water already tampered with by Pinar. So that the blood-feud was kept. Jacintha knew it and would not tell any of us. She would not even tell Pinar. And, by that cancellation of wrongs which fools call poetic justice, Jacintha would be alive at this moment had she refrained from that final cruelty of keeping Pinar in doubt.”

“ Did Pinar—did Pinar poison her ? ”

“ Yes and no. Jacintha knew how it was with Pinar. She would not tell Pinar the truth for Pinar might betray her if only by chance, and the doubt which was enslaving us all would have been removed. But she did not want Pinar to commit suicide. So she stole from her a packet that contained that Spanish poison of theirs and destroyed the powder—the same compound that actually killed Uncle Gregory. Pinar became aware of the theft and rummaged in Jacintha’s private chest. Pinar found what

she thought was the Spanish poison—a powder in the same blue envelope. It was really those three missing tablets reduced by Jacintha to powder."

" Why did she powder them, do you think ? "

" Answer that question with another. Suppose Pinar had found the three tablets ? . . . The doubt would have been at an end. She would have proclaimed it joyfully and—there would have been no Taormina."

" Why didn't Jacintha throw them away ? "

" For any one of a number of good reasons. For one—if she herself had been accused of poisoning her grandfather—the possession of the poison with which he was supposed to have died would have cleared her. For another, to a woman of that temperament to have the means of painless death in her possession would have given a sense of power. Also, if it should ever have suited her purpose to remove the doubt, that hyoscine provided the means of doing so. Well, I've told you the rest ; how the accident happened. I—I actually saw the table turn, you know. . . ."

Aline shuddered.

" It's pretty staggering," she remarked. " Vendetta, you know."

" Vendetta ? " echoed Christopher, absently. " Yes, vendetta in a way, I suppose. . . . Look here."

His hand went to his pocket and took out a couple of letters pinned together.

" I had to go through her papers and I found this. You don't want the top one—that's a formal note from some mercantile johnny. *This* is a letter to her from Uncle Gregory which she must have received a week or so ago."

" How was that possible ? "

" Blenkiron seems to have put himself to considerable pains to make it possible," answered Christopher. " He must have written the letter on the night of his death, or at the earliest, the night before. He sent it under double cover, first to the Orissam offices in New York—his old Company, you know—then to an officer at sea. Read Blenkiron's letter—or let me read it for you as his fist is a bit difficult."

Christopher scowled at the letter in his hand and then began to read.

" ' My dear Granddaughter,—During the last few days of my life you began to suspect that I was aware of your identity. Let me confess that I have known you to be

my dear granddaughter for nearly two years—the whole of the time, in fact, during which you have been my secretary. And for the greater part of that time I have known that you wanted to kill me. I learned only yesterday, however, that you are bound by the oath that was taken for you to kill me within twenty-four hours from now or make a poltroon of yourself.

“I am taking steps to ensure that this shall be a posthumous letter. There is a subtle fascination in a posthumous letter—to the writer—which I feel sure you will not grudge me.

“Your dilemma at the moment of my writing intrigues me. You must make a poltroon of yourself to yourself, or you, who have more than a little of my blood in your veins, must become a murderer in obedience to a vendetta which you despise.

“This, believe me, is the only real injury that has been inflicted upon you—and it was inflicted upon you by your father, not by myself. There is enough of the Spaniard in you to make your emotional being the victim of the exotic religion of the vendetta—and only enough of the Blenkiron in you to enable you to see its more obvious moral absurdities. If there were more of me in you, you would be able to break through the moral absurdities and reach the moral subtlety that it is no more ridiculous to slay in the quarrel of your mother than to slay in the quarrel of your king.

“If you do kill me, therefore (of which for your sake I am more than a little afraid) you will probably denounce yourself as a murderer and be hanged. And if you do not kill me (of which for your sake I am equally afraid) you will probably denounce yourself as a poltroon and be damned.

“Therefore I have decided to take the matter out of your hands, while leaving them sufficiently bloodstained to meet the exigencies of the vendetta. The blood-promise, as I believe it is called, demands my extinction within twenty-four hours.

“Come now to the moment when you are reading this letter—some few weeks, as I have ensured, after my death. Were you surprised at the coincidence of my natural death at the psychologically exact moment? No—unless my analysis of you be gravely at fault. By now you will have investigated my death—and you will have learned the manner of it. In my own manner, Jacintha, I have made reparation for any injury that may have resulted to your

unfortunate mother through my lack of imagination. I have put you right with the gods your mother taught you to worship. And by doing so I have left you free to worship the gods of your own choice. Believe if you like that it is merely my own vanity which makes me declare that you, my granddaughter, are too good to be wholly absorbed in this vendetta nonsense. But you are a woman and you are not strong enough to free your imagination. The men of my class, and particularly the men of my family, learn the trick of fighting themselves. Not so the women. They need a helping hand. Confess that I have given you that helping hand and do not feel obliged to stamp out any liking you may have for the memory of—Your Affectionate Grandfather—Gregory Blenkiron.' "

Christopher finished reading, and turned to Aline for comment.

"It's an odd letter," she said slowly. "But I don't see that it's particularly significant. It tells her nothing she did not know—of any importance."

"True! But it's not very clever of you to say so and leave it at that," said Christopher. He poked a long finger at the letter. "If she knew all that from the beginning, don't you see it does in all that morbid Spanish vendetta nonsense she handed out to me? She may have been sincere in her desire to kill him—the traditions implanted by her mother being too strong for her. I'm not denying that. But afterwards—when she knew that he had planned his own death—when this letter made assurance doubly sure—don't you see that by the very act of planning his death on that night—the twelve-hour limit and all the rest of it—don't you see that by that act Gregory Blenkiron successfully laughed at the vendetta or the blood-feud or whatever you call it? With reasoning induced by her mother she had made him a monster. Then the monster of her imagination had patted her head and said to her—'Dear little girl, if she wants her blood-feud she shall have it, bless her heart.' In the last resort it was nothing to do with vendetta or Spanish blood or morbidity of that kind. Gregory Blenkiron rose superior to it all—and she was angry with him for doing so."

"But in spite of Blenkiron's fantastic plottings, it was Pinar who killed him."

"Yes—and Jacintha had brain enough to grasp that

that was the merest accident and did not affect the logic of Blenkiron's attitude. . . . Somehow I'm being jerked into using all this against Jacintha. I don't mean to. By planning to fulfil the vendetta for her, Blenkiron patronised her—and that hurt her . . . I'm frightfully sorry for her, you know."

It was a long time before she spoke, and then :

"Don't you feel that she still holds us apart?" she asked. "More strongly than when she was alive. . . . The barrier has been removed, but we haven't removed it. It has crumbled of its own disease. We can't dance through the dust to each other. It would be so ugly. You—mourn her, Christopher, don't you?"

"Yes. Yes, I do mourn her. For a time I will mourn her in solitude and measure my own part in the tale of destruction. . . . It all comes back to my first dishonourable compromise over the distribution of the property."

"Let us be superstitious," said Aline softly, "and say there was a curse on the Blenkiron money." She stole a glance at him. "If I give it back to you, Christopher, will you remove the curse?"

Christopher started and stared.

"I'm afraid I don't quite——"

Aline clasped her hands excitedly.

"On what the Stock Exchange calls settling day," she explained, "Mr. Cave came to my father's office. I was there."

"Good heavens, I had almost forgotten about Turley's trouble—and Arabella's," muttered Christopher. "What happened?"

"Daddy wanted to release Mr. Cave from his obligations and I encouraged him," said Aline. "But Mr. Cave entirely refused to accept charity—and then I encouraged *him*. In the end I made Mr. Cave compromise. He handed Daddy all his assets—nearly half a million, including Miss Arabella's, and the rest was washed out, and he is to be a director of Prade and Watkins, and that seemed to please them both, for they shook hands and were getting quite sloppy when I left them."

Christopher waited.

"I tackled Daddy when he came home. I pointed out that he had nearly three-quarters of a million which had been thrust at him solely because Stephen loved me and Miss Arabella had once loved him. I was very brutal. I made him pretty wretched."

"I don't see that he deserved it," put in Christopher.

"He didn't," assented Aline. "His hands are clean, and he agreed with me that he must keep them so, that he must not profit by the transaction. In the end he deposited all Stephen's securities and all Mr. Cave's in my name at the bank."

"H'm!" grunted Christopher. "Did you try to parcel it all out to the original owners?"

"Yes, and I'm very glad I failed. I tried Miss Arabella first. She was very charming. She said that nothing would persuade her to touch a penny of the money that had nearly made her a criminal and worse. Those were her own words. Mr. Cave had already refused his little lot. And when I asked Stephen, he said he would rather I let him paint me. I am letting him paint me. The first sitting is to-morrow."

"Stephen thinks he has bought you," said Christopher, slowly.

"He has bought me. But by the time the picture is finished I don't think he will—request delivery. His work will create him. I was always sure of it."

"And you will return the money?"

"If he wants it. It will depend on the portrait, and what the portrait does to him. I believe the Aline he's going to make in colour and line will mean all the world to him; the flesh and blood Aline he'll just—forget. . . . So the Blenkiron fortune comes back to you, Christopher."

"To me? Do you imagine I am going to accept the money?"

"Yes, please. You alone can apply it so that in the end it will have been a good thing for humanity that Blenkiron piled up a fortune. You alone can break the chain of disaster that was forged by that fierce old egotist."

Christopher paced the room.

"I have no confidence in my ability to remove the curse, as you put it," he said. "Aren't you inviting me to a second disaster of the same kind?"

"Perhaps I am," she said, quickly. "Perhaps I am asking you to gamble again—with yourself. Think it over while you mourn, Christopher. . . . Dear, what about Pinar?"

"She knows the truth. She is very happy that the blood-feud is satisfied. Very angry with Jacintha, yet full of pity for her, because she was not all Spanish. . . . I am sending Pinar back to Spain. Curiously enough, she has quite forgiven herself her part in Jacintha's death. It was an evil spirit, she says.

"Perhaps it was. . . ."

CHAPTER XLVI

THE FOUR FRIENDS

THERE followed the months of labour and mourning and contemplation. The mourning was none the less deep in that it was ungarnished with outward trappings and ungarnished with the inward trappings of vain longing and vain regret. Remorse there was, but no regret. The honesty of Christopher's sorrow for the tragedy of Jacintha was unsmirched by the self-pretence that he would whisk her back to life had he the power.

Winter passed into spring and there came no word from Aline. Not that he was expecting any. It had been left that he should write her if and when he should feel equal to accepting the stewardship of the Blenkiron money. It had been left, too, by tacit understanding that she would tell him if and when she were to marry Stephen. In his heart was heavy the fear that she would marry Stephen. Often as the evenings grew longer he would wonder about the sittings she had promised to give Stephen. He wondered how much painting Stephen would do. He learned from a newspaper how much painting Stephen had done when he saw Stephen's name and Aline's in the list of the year's Academy pictures. He admitted to himself a considerable surprise and a still more considerable curiosity. The curiosity to learn what Stephen had read into Aline's golden vitality was so powerful that for more than a month he resisted its gratification. June was nearing its end before he went to the Academy.

When he found the "Portrait of Miss Aline Prade," he told himself that it was fantastic, absurd. Then he knew that it was just what he had expected it to be, except that it was far better drawn. Stephen had caught the softness of her, but had missed the challenge. He had

tinged the beauty of her with a sweet girlish loveliness that was not hers. The brightness of the eyes was, he supposed, a remarkable piece of paintwork, but Stephen's incurable romanticism had added a hint of melancholy where there should have been nothing but readiness.

On a subconscious impulsion he turned, and faced the original of the portrait.

She was all in pale, clear colour, like the summer day outside. Her hair was amazingly golden, her slenderness poised and vibrant like a reed.

"It's very good as a picture, but it's not a bit like you," he said.

"How do you know what I was like while Stephen was painting me?" she asked, and it seemed to him futile to answer. He was so right—her eyes were dancing with readiness.

"If you were really like that you must have let him pose your mind as well as your body. How are you, Aline?"

"Tired. I have been here every day for ages, waiting for you to come and see my portrait. It's a success, you know. His agent has quite a nice little queue of clients waiting to be painted."

"I'm glad," said Christopher, absently. "Are you going to marry him? . . . I see you're not. Why didn't you write to me?"

"I tried to," she answered. "But I didn't know how to begin. So I came here instead."

For the moment he was puzzled. Either she was being flippant or Aline the courageous was unmistakably fluttering.

"There's Uncle Timothy," she whispered, explosively, before he could make up his mind. "I gave him the slip just now. I must run. Good-bye."

She drifted away to an elderly man in an old-fashioned coat and urged him into the next room.

Fluttering!

Annoyance was swamped in a swift, tingling pleasure as Christopher left the Academy and told himself there was going to be no nonsense. From the Academy he went to the Scarfield Institute and made the necessary arrangements for taking a holiday.

The arrangements occupied him until close upon

midnight. At ten o'clock on the following morning he telephoned the Prades and asked for Aline.

"Miss Prade is out of town, sir," a maid told him.

"Is she?" snapped Christopher. "Then she must have left this morning. Will you ask her ladyship to speak to me, please?"

"Her ladyship has just gone out, sir. She will be back——"

"How very annoying! It is most important. Can you tell me where Miss Prade has gone?"

"She has gone to Devonshire for a short holiday, sir, to Minehead by the ten-thirty."

"Thank you very much," said Christopher. He replaced the receiver and looked at his watch.

A few minutes past ten. He could just do it if he were quick.

He lost five minutes packing a suitcase and another five in waiting his turn at the booking-office. The train was starting as he rushed on to the platform. He swung himself into the guard's van and learned that the first stop was Taunton.

Taunton was a weary way. . . .

At Taunton he tipped the guard and slipped into the first compartment that would accommodate him. At Minehead he alighted before the train had stopped and strode down the line of carriages until he saw Aline at the window.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"Yes. Why didn't you come when we stopped at Taunton?" At his surprise her laugh rang out.

"You knew I was on board, you——?"

"Of course. I was craning out of the window at Paddington and I went on craning until I saw you come. You nearly got left behind at Taunton, didn't you?"

"Minx!"

"Laggard! Go and see to my luggage—a trunk and a basket with three kittens in it. I've ordered a car."

He went. Presently the trunk and his own suitcase and the kittens and Aline and he were all in a shabby little car which she drove herself. Time slipped on unheeded. They had crossed the county boundary and a red Devon road was stretching itself out under their wheels and the sun was wonderful upon their faces.

"My cottage," she said, after a happy hour of speed and silence. "Down there, in the valley, with sorrel growing on the roof."

They swung down, into and through a little village that smelt of apples.

"Here we are."

The cottage door stood wide. From the kitchen came a Devon voice welcoming "Miss Allan." In the long, low sitting-room the roses gleamed once in the soft air and once in the polished tables upon which they stood.

"Araby stayed here all April," said Aline. "Oh, how she loved it! Isn't she a dear?"

"I saw her and Miriam and Turley once, to tell them the truth, once and for all, about Uncle Gregory's death. I told them, and got out—went to a quiet hotel and spent my days there or at the Institute. I sold the Grosvenor Square house as it stood. I don't know what happened to any of the others."

"Mrs. Barnaby lives in the lovely house in Chelsea. She has five hundred a year, you know—she got it before she made her inheritance over to Stephen. That exhibition of her work in Paris did her ever so much good—commercially, I mean. She's almost as sought after as Stephen. He's quite famous, and quite—grown. He's a rather fine man."

"Turley's pulling in your father's boat?"

"Yes; with success. And Arabella—she's very poor, you know. She only has the tiny little income that was her pocket-money when she lived in Grosvenor Square, and she won't accept a penny from anyone."

"Where is she?"

Aline piloted him back to the front door. She pointed to another little cottage down the road.

"It's bigger than she needs, she says; so she minds the women's babies while they're working in the fields."

"Good lord!" said Christopher, almost reverently.

"Now we will have tea—high tea," said Aline.

They had it. Eggs and brown bread and honey and cream. A kindly woman waited on them, looking indulgently upon their delight in themselves and each other. After she left them, they sat on talking, looking at each other. The sun slanted along the red tiles of the little parlour; the kittens rolled upon the warm stones.

" I must provide for poor old Araby in spite of herself," said Christopher. " The rest of the money to the Institute, if you think well ? "

" Oh yes. Rather ! "

" When will you marry me ? "

She did not flutter now.

" When d'you want me to ? "

" As soon as possible. Shall it be down here ? If your people would come——"

" Of course they will ! They'll be so happy."

" The sea's somewhere near, isn't it ? I want to get down to it—with you. I must take my suit-case to the inn ; do you think they can put me up ? "

" I wired to them yesterday to book you a room."

" Aline ! "

" No. . . . Come down to the sea. There's a place where you can see the moon rise."

" Shall I kiss you there, Aline ? "

" Yes, Christopher. Please."

THE END

